

THE BRITISH ARMY
AND THE CONTINENT

1904-1914



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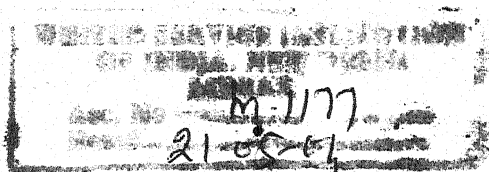
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PREFACE

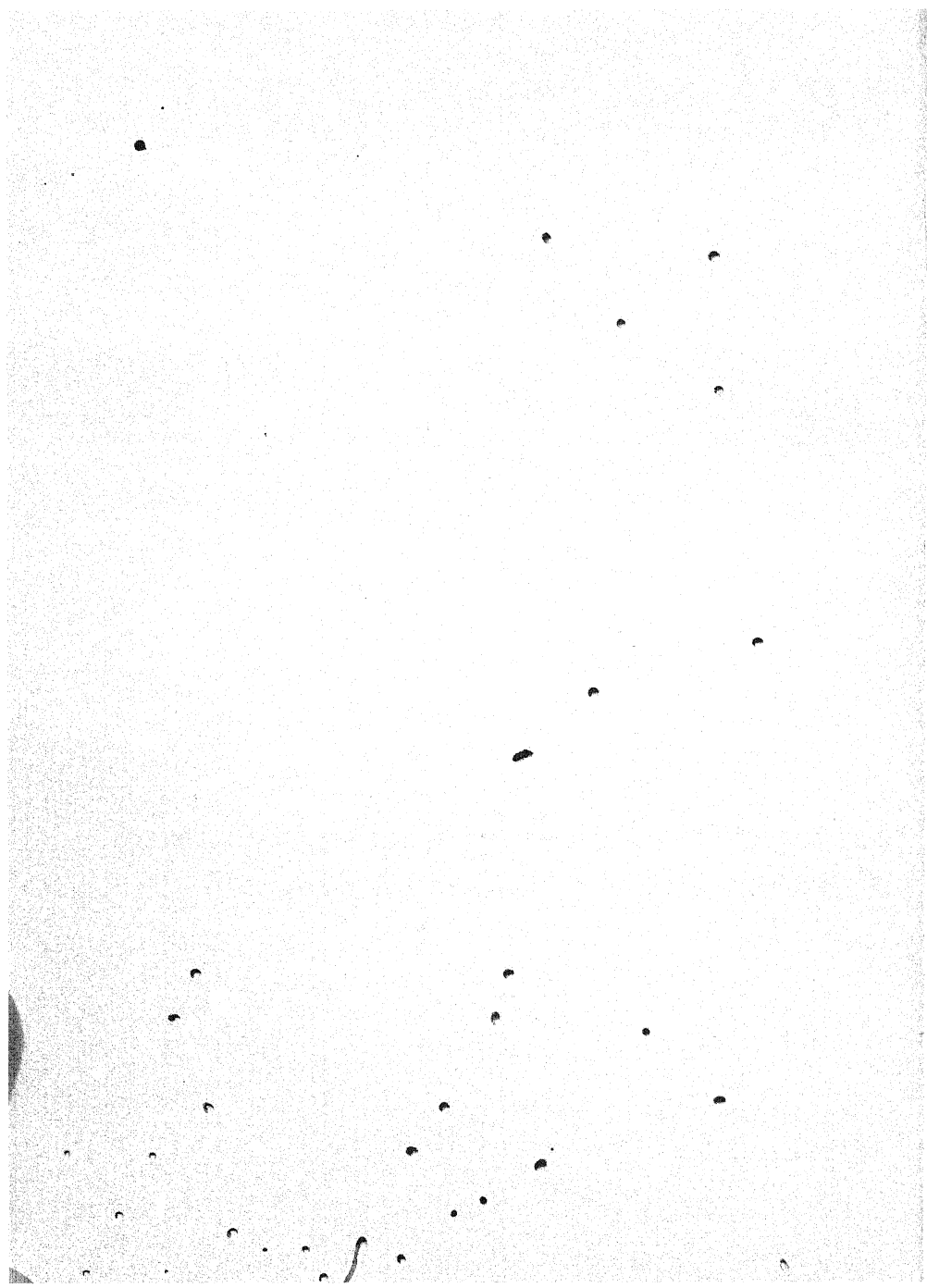
This book is an attempt to tell the story of the pre-War military conversations with France and Belgium and also to relate them to the larger question of British foreign policy at that time.

The subject has, on the whole, attracted more attention abroad, notably in Germany, than in this country. I readily acknowledge my debt to various German authorities, especially to P. Kluke, though I have felt obliged to reject many of his conclusions with regard to policy.

In dealing with a subject of this sort, which belongs to the strange borderland between Policy and Strategy, the investigator is beset with pitfalls. Nevertheless, as I have tried to show, the subject is one which cannot be omitted from any assessment of Grey's work during his period of high office.

The book does not pretend, however, to deal in the main with British foreign policy after the grave decision was taken at the beginning of this century to put an end to British "Isolation." But it does serve, perhaps, as a commentary on the consequences of that great diplomatic revolution which may not be entirely without interest in these latter days.

J. E. T.



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THE BRITISH ARMY AND THE CONTINENT

CHAPTER I

THE ORIGINS OF THE WESTERN FRONT

The war-strategy of any Power cannot be understood without reference to a variety of factors, geographical, political, economic and even psychological. It cannot exist in a vacuum; nor can it remain fixed and unalterable. In the case of Great Britain, the simple fact that she is an island cannot, of course, change; but the strategical implications of this can and have done so from time to time. Thus her security from attack as a result of her island situation has varied as her naval, or, more recently, her air power has varied. Other factors than the geographical are even more subject to change.

Similar considerations necessarily govern a country's foreign policy, and foreign policy and defence are manifestly interconnected. In this country one would assume that defence is conditioned by foreign policy and, generally speaking, this has probably been the case. At all events, before developments in British foreign policy made it likely that Great Britain might have to

take part in a war fought out in western Europe, this possibility was not taken into serious consideration by the responsible military authorities. It was the conclusion of the Anglo-French Agreement in April 1904, whatever its original character and intentions may have been, which raised the possibility of British troops fighting on the Continent of Europe. This serious, and to many unwelcome, prospect undoubtedly determined the course of British military policy between 1904 and 1914. Its influence is revealed, not only by the military conversations with France and Belgium but also, if less obviously, in those changes which may be summed up conveniently as the "Haldane Reforms." The Boer War no doubt made considerable changes inevitable, but the character of those changes was largely determined by the diplomatic situation in Europe. Haldane's success in tackling a problem which had baffled his immediate predecessors was no doubt due to the fact that, unlike them, he had something definite for which to prepare, that is, a probable war with Germany.

On the other hand, before the Boer War, it is safe to say that a campaign in Europe was scarcely one of the objects for which the British army was maintained. These objects were in fact defined in 1888 by Edward Stanhope, then Secretary of State for War, under five heads, as follows:

1. Support of the Civil Power in all parts of the United Kingdom.
2. The provision of men for India.
3. The garrisoning of all fortresses and coaling-stations at home and abroad.

4. The rapid mobilisation for home defence of the Army. Corps of Regulars, and one partly composed of Regulars and partly of Militia, and the organisation for related duties of Auxiliary Forces not allotted to Army Corps or Garrisons.
5. The ability, "subject to the foregoing considerations and to their financial obligations," to send abroad in case of necessity two complete Army Corps, with Cavalry Division and Line of Communication. "But it will be distinctly understood that the probability of the employment of an Army Corps in the field in any European War is sufficiently improbable to make it the primary duty of the military authorities to organise our forces efficiently for the defence of this country."

It was explained that this statement had been drawn up with reference to the programme of the Admiralty and with knowledge of the assistance which the navy was capable of rendering in the most likely contingencies.

The above memorandum will be found in the *Report* of the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa¹ (1903) and; having quoted it, the *Report* goes on to state that "the principles laid down in Mr. Stanhope's memorandum had, since 1888, governed the whole of the preparations of this country for a possible war."

Stanhope, it will be noticed, went out of his way to stress the unlikelihood of British troops fighting on the Continent of Europe. Indeed, all the emphasis is laid on two obligations, the imperial and overseas, and the

¹ C. 1789 (1903), p. 31.

threat of invasion. Moreover, it was invasion by France which was in mind. This was definitely stated in a memorandum drawn up by Wolseley, then Commander-in-Chief, on November 3rd, 1897, which was designed to support his plea for an increase in the army. He laid down as the first requirement of the army "that it should, with the help of the Auxiliary Forces, be able to protect this country against the largest invading force that France can be expected—under favouring conditions—to put across the Channel."¹

An expeditionary force was admittedly envisaged, if only as the final object, but not one which was to land and to operate on the Continent. And not only was direct military intervention of this sort in a European war considered unlikely, but the idea that Britain should, in military affairs, model herself on the methods and organisation of Continental Powers aroused strong opposition in some quarters at least. One of the recommendations of the Hartington Commission (1890) was that Britain should adopt the idea of a General Staff. This called forth strong objections from Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who had already served as Secretary for War and was to do so again a little later. A General Staff, he said, might be necessary in Continental countries which were "constantly and necessarily concerned in watching the military conditions of their neighbours . . . and in planning possible operations in possible wars against them." But England had no designs against her European neighbours; her military problems were mainly those of Home defence, and the

¹ G. 1789 (1903), pp. 242-3.

defence of India. For these purposes the existing organisation was adequate; if a General Staff were set up it might therefore be tempted to enlarge in an undesirable way the scope of British military policy.¹

A General Staff on the Continental model tended, in short, to imply that Great Britain had military problems to solve akin to those of the Continental Powers. In truth her problems were or should be quite different. And if Campbell-Bannerman and his party expressed this view in its extremest form, their attitude differed only in degree and not in kind from the official (and Conservative) definition of the objects for which the army existed.

In this, no doubt, one can trace the influence of the contemporary state of Britain's relations with the Powers when Stanhope drew up his memorandum. It belongs to the period of British "isolation," so called, at least to that preceding the momentous decision at the end of the century to seek an alliance abroad. But during the period of Salisbury's second administration (1886-1892) Britain can hardly be described as standing in such friendless isolation as was her lot between 1880-5 and after 1895. On the contrary, Salisbury, in defiance of what is often alleged to have been a fixed tradition of British policy, leaned decidedly during these years to the side of the Triple Alliance, obviously the stronger, indeed, until the very close of the period, the only real power-group in Europe. The actual contact with the Triple Alliance was established via the Mediterranean Agreements of 1887. Behind these stood the naval

¹ Spender, J. A., *Life of Campbell-Bannerman*, I, pp. 117-19.

principle of the Two-power-standard expressed in the Naval Defence Act of 1889.¹

The prime motive of this orientation was, of course, the threat offered to Britain's imperial position by the hostility of France over Egypt, for instance, or in Further India, and that of Russia on the North-West Frontier. Military policy thus fell in line with the diplomatic position, its two main principles being the defence of the United Kingdom against a French invasion and the security of India. In the 'nineties the diplomatic situation underwent dramatic changes. In place of the comparative certainties of Bismarck there were substituted the youth and the impulses of a new emperor; whilst France and Russia succeeded in arriving at an understanding (1891-3). The real isolation which Britain was to experience after 1895, if not after 1892, could not but affect the premises on which British military policy was based. A period of uncertainty set in which was only to be ended when, as a result of the Japanese Alliance and still more the *Entente* with France, the diplomatic situation was at least clarified.

But it would be absurd to imagine that, even whilst the Stanhope memorandum still held the field, the British military authorities closed their eyes to developments in Europe. On the contrary, for years before 1900, the nature and probable course of the Franco-German War of the future was being studied in the British Staff College, and a German advance through Belgium had

¹ For a discussion of Salisbury's policy in the early years of his second administration, see my article on "Lord Salisbury, Seemacht und britischer Isolierung" in the *Berliner Monatshefte*, Jan. 1935.

been regarded as the likely solution of the problem presented to the enemy by the fortifications of the French eastern frontier. And no doubt the position of Britain in this connection as one of the guarantors of Belgian neutrality had also been examined. Even so, to study this as a useful academic exercise was not necessarily to assume that Britain would play any part in such a contest. Before this was possible a change in Britain's diplomatic alignments was essential. In particular the spectre of an Anglo-German war had to become much more substantial than it was in, say, the early 'nineties.

By 1900, on the other hand, the state of Anglo-German relations was such that a war between these Powers could no longer be regarded as entirely out of the question. The deterioration had been especially pronounced since the return of Lord Salisbury to power in 1895 and if complaints about German trade-rivalry were a symptom rather than a cause of the new antagonism, it was very different with the recent remarkable development of German naval ambitions. A wholly new and disturbing vista was opened up by these and related tendencies in the colonial field. In this connection it is interesting to note an avowal of Grierson's. In 1896 he went to Berlin as military attaché sympathetically disposed towards the German people. At the end of the following year he was already expressing the opinion in a letter to a friend that England must go to war with Germany and that soon.¹

Even so, though the convictions which Grierson expressed privately no doubt coloured his official pro-

¹ Macdiarmid, D. S., *Life of Grierson*, pp. 115 ff., 133 ff.

nouncements,¹ the extent of their influence remains doubtful. Judging by some remarks of Robertson's it was probably small. In October 1902 the latter, when head of the Foreign Section of the Intelligence Division, was asked to give a military opinion on the idea of an alliance with Germany as a means of checking the Middle Eastern ambitions of Russia. After dwelling on the importance of Britain preserving the balance of power and pointing to the new preponderance which was growing up with its centre of gravity at Berlin, Robertson concluded that a German alliance was not practicable and that Germany was rather a dangerous rival than a potential friend. But he goes on to suggest that this memorandum had little apparent effect, as Britain's military liabilities overseas continued to be fixed, not by the possibility of war with Germany, but rather by the requirements of India in view of a possible war with Russia.²

Nevertheless, it would seem that about the same time as Robertson was busy with this memorandum, the problems of a possible Anglo-German war were not being entirely ignored. Waters, who succeeded Grierson at Berlin, has stated in one of his books that in 1902 the War Office regarded war with Germany as within the bounds of possibility "earlier perhaps rather than later." In such a war, however, it was intended that the navy must do most of the work. With regard to the army, it was reckoned that during the first three or four months, whilst new forces were being raised, there would be three

¹ Though there is no evidence that they did in any reproduced in *B.D.*

² Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, pp. 20 ff.

Army Corps available for service outside the British Isles. These, it was believed, could not invade and defeat Germany in Europe; their objective was to be the capture of the German colonies. Would this, Waters was asked, bring Germany to her knees? He was confident that it would not; but he does not give many further details and we must therefore take this as the accepted British plan in the event of war with Germany with considerable reserve.¹

It is interesting, however, to notice the stress laid at this time on the rôle of the fleet and that there was apparently no intention of undertaking military operations on the Continent. And when Mr. Brodrick addressed the Colonial Conference of 1902 on matters relevant to his department, he gave precisely the same impression, though he did not deal specifically with a possible Anglo-German war.²

It may be assumed, then, with as much certainty as a question necessarily shrouded in obscurity permits, that before 1903, before, that is, the negotiations for the Anglo-French Agreement were seriously begun, the British military authorities, whilst they had considered the possibility and the problems of an Anglo-German war, were still not yet envisaging the employment of British troops on the Continent of Europe either with or without the collaboration of a foreign Power.

On these conceptions the *Entente* of April 1904 soon exercised a remarkable influence. Nor need this occa-

¹ Waters, *Private and Personal*, pp. 240-1.

² Report of the Colonial Conference of 1902, *Cd. 1299* (1902), p. 29, and cf. p. 30.

sion surprise. If, as late as 1897, Wolseley had been making dispositions in view of a possible invasion of England by the French, this particular problem must have been deprived of much of its urgency by the events of 1904. Some re-orientation of British military policy was, in consequence, inevitable and it appears that soon after the Agreement with France was signed the Secretariat of the Committee of Imperial Defence began to consider its possible naval and military implications.¹ Apparently, too, the Russo-Japanese War provided a concurrent stimulus to British military thought. In January 1905 Grierson was pointing the moral that Japan, the island power, needed strength on land in addition to predominance at sea.² More significant, one of the problems examined by the newly-formed General Staff in 1905 was that of a war between France and Germany. It was assumed that the latter, wishing to turn the French positions on the Meuse, sent part of her forces through Belgium and that Great Britain had decided to go to the assistance of Belgium in fulfilment of the Treaty of 1839. In March and April 1905 a war-game was actually played, on Grierson's instructions, in order to elucidate the problems with which Britain might in consequence be faced. Robertson was in command of the imaginary German army and his plan of campaign bore a curious resemblance to the actual events of 1914, notably in an advance from the region of Aix-la-Chapelle north of the Meuse and Sambre

¹ Aston, Sir G., "The Entente Cordiale and the Military Conversations," *Quarterly Review*, April 1932, p. 366.

² *Ibid.*, p. 367.

outflanking the French in overwhelming strength. It was concluded that there would be very little chance of stopping this turning-movement unless British troops were to arrive on the scene both quickly and in considerable numbers.¹ Robertson and Grierson, it may be pointed out, both visited the Franco-Belgian frontier during 1905.²

In these significant activities apparently only the contingency of a German violation of Belgium in such a war was considered. It need not, however, be assumed that the British had received any advice as to the existence of a "Schlieffen" plan; such a plan may well have been assumed to exist in view of its various military advantages.³ Indeed, as we have seen, it was considered probable years before.

Doubts, however, whether Germany would take a step, which, however attractive in other ways, would involve a flagrant breach of her pledged word, still remained. This particular question was in fact discussed in the Committee of Imperial Defence. Its Secretary, Sir George Clarke, had, in August 1905, pointed out to Balfour, then Prime Minister, that, in case of a Franco-German war, military exigencies might induce the Germans to violate the neutrality of Belgium. Accordingly the Prime Minister asked the General

¹ Aston, Sir G., "The Entente Cordiale and the Military Conversations," *Quarterly Review*, April 1932, pp. 367-8, 369; Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, p. 24.

² Robertson, *Private to Field Marshal*, p. 140.

³ M. J. Bardoux in an article in the *Revue des deux Mondes*, Aug. 1, 1932, pp. 526 ff., makes the surprising statement that it was knowledge of the Schlieffen plan which led Britain to settle with France in 1904.

Staff to report on the probability of such a violation and to state how soon after mobilisation began, two British Army Corps could be landed in Belgium.¹ This, so far as one can see, was the first rather tentative and unsubstantial appearance in history of the later famous "B.E.F."

It was when this report of the General Staff came up for discussion that a division of opinion on the likelihood of a German invasion of Belgium made itself felt. The officers under Robertson in the German Section of the Intelligence Department considered it certain. But he tells how a certain minister put forward a contrary view and how, "after a rambling discussion," the matter was dropped and in consequence nothing at that time was done to prepare a definite policy in view of a possible situation which Britain was actually to face about nine years later.

Indeed, he goes on to argue that the probability of England being drawn into a Franco-German war was not one which ministers were inclined to discuss seriously. To consider military intervention on the Continent, he suggests, was to be brought up against the possibility of conscription and so ministers preferred not to look at it, but to adhere to existing standards of military requirements which called for no such drastic change. Such a procedure appealed with especial force, he considers, to a "moribund government," though it did nothing to remove uneasiness at the War Office.

But he suggests another and more significant reason for this apparent lack of interest. Although he himself

¹ Aston, pp. 372-3. Cf. Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, p. 24.

was not of this opinion, he admits that it was commonly believed that, if England were to intervene in a Franco-German war, her rôle would be predominantly naval.¹ This view was apparently current in 1902² and its persistence foreshadows the later clash between two possible British war-strategies; on the one hand, the idea of a thorough-going land war on the Continent, on the other, the more traditional "amphibious" strategy which gave the leading part to the navy, using it no doubt incidentally as the "base" for judicious and small expeditions by the army.

The latter school of thought, it seems, could already command the support of no less a person than the First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher.³ It is probable that, by 1905, he was already contemplating the use of the navy to make possible the descent of British troops at a point on the German coastline should Britain find herself at war with that Power.

It is not easy, however, to trace precisely the genesis of such plans which, with remarkable persistence, and in spite of Military Conversations with France and Belgium, continued to be entertained in the Admiralty at least until the late summer of 1911. Fisher himself appears always to have believed in "amphibious warfare," in joint naval and military operations. They were not only in keeping with British tradition, but he considered them admirably suited for a country which, whilst its fleet was the most powerful in the world, had only a

¹ Robertson, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 25-7.

² See above, p. 16.

³ For Fisher on amphibious warfare, Bacon, *Fisher*, II, pp. 181 ff., and below.

small professional army to set beside the vast hosts of the Continent. This small army, he felt, might be used to the best effect if, at a critical moment, the power of the navy were used to throw it on the flank and rear of the main body of the enemy. As he put it in 1909, the "invincible navy" was to be the "citadel of the military force."¹ Fisher could never bring himself to agree with the strategic soundness of sending the Expeditionary Force to form but a slight addition to the numbers of the French army.² In part, of course, this attitude may also have been due to a deep mistrust of the capacity of the French. At the beginning of 1906 he certainly believed that the Germans would defeat the French on land and was anxious, no doubt, lest the British army should go down alongside them.³

Early in January 1906 we are told he was not prepared in his official capacity to guarantee the passage of the army across the Channel and he expressed his preference for what Repington calls "scratching in the Baltic."⁴ A similar plan makes a curious appearance some months earlier just after the sensational fall of Delcassé (June 6th, 1905). The question whether there were any "military conversations" at this time between Great Britain and France must be considered later. For the moment it is sufficient to notice the wide

¹ In a letter to Lord Esher, March 15th, 1909; see Brett, M. V. (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Esher*, II, p. 375.

² For instances of his objections to this course in later years see, in addition to those mentioned below, Baron, *Life*, II, pp. 142, 146, 147, 148.

³ See below, p. 39.

⁴ Repington, *First World War*, I, pp. 11-12.

circulation in the autumn of 1905 of remarkable rumours as to British intentions in case of a Franco-German war.

On July 12th, 1905, the *Gaulois* published an interview with Delcassé in which he stated that he had told his colleagues that he was sure of English support in case of war and had, in fact, laid before them the outline of alliance. In October three articles on Delcassé's fall were published in the *Matin* and it was stated that England had given a verbal promise, in the event of a German attack on France, to mobilise the fleet, occupy the Kiel Canal and land 100,000 men in Schleswig-Holstein. This story was confirmed by the *Figaro*. Naturally these "revelations" had a profound effect in Germany, not least upon the Emperor, and Metternich called Lansdowne's attention to them. Eventually the Germans accepted the British Foreign Secretary's explanation that no such promise had been made by His Majesty's Government and, from the diplomatic point of view, the incident soon closed.¹ For all that it is not without interest because of the relatively precise information given as to the way in which British assistance was to be rendered.

Speculation as to who made this offer of armed support, if indeed it was ever made, must remain largely futile. Lord Sanderson refers to this proposed landing in Schleswig-Holstein in a letter which he wrote to Professor Harold Temperley in 1922 and which has since been published in the *British Documents*.² He mentions "loose talk in naval circles and in some high

¹ Gooch, G. P., *Before the War*, I, p. 60.

² *B.D.*, III, No. 105 (a).

quarters of a possible expedition to Schleswig in the possible event of war." He did not believe that such a measure was ever seriously entertained; the report being put about, probably, for the purpose of a warning. It is nevertheless remarkable that in these revelations England should have been said to be proposing a strategic plan entirely in keeping with what we know to have been the views of Sir John Fisher. Even so, this cannot be said to prove that this was the only war-plan contemplated by the British at this time. We know that Fisher persisted in his ideas for years after an alternative scheme was contemplated by the War Office.

CHAPTER II

THE CONVERSATIONS BEGIN

As soon as the British Government decided that it might in certain circumstances intervene on the side of France in a Franco-German war, the idea of consultations between the responsible military and naval authorities in each country at once suggested itself. If the joint action of the two Powers were to be effective, then surely it should follow some prearranged plan. Co-operation should not be improvised on the day when hostilities broke out; the broad principles, at least, should be settled in advance. It could not, of course, be argued that this was essential, but its advantages were at least as considerable as the drawbacks. The latter were certainly serious. It was difficult to maintain that to engage in military conversations with France was not a very serious step which threatened, in fact, to transform entirely the relationship between the two Powers. It was hard to see how they could be said to be implicit in the agreements which constituted the *Entente*. Those agreements where they related to future contingencies engaged England to offer *diplomatic* support to France on certain extra-European questions. They made no reference to military intervention in Europe. Military conversations might therefore go a long way to transform an *Entente*

into something like an alliance, defensive, perhaps, but an alliance none the less. It was not that Britain must necessarily avoid anything of the nature of a defensive alliance. She had but recently bound herself openly, in certain circumstances, to render armed assistance to Japan. But to do the same in the case of France was a very different matter. If the *Entente* had been generally approved, it had been so as a harmless "goodwill" settlement, not as an instrument which might involve Great Britain in the long-standing quarrel between France and Germany. Was it to be transformed in this way and transformed by secret military and naval engagements?

In spite of these grave considerations, the British Government would appear to have been willing, when the *Entente* was barely a year old, to engage in military conversations with France.

It is impossible to say exactly when these conversations began. Those carried on in December 1905 and January 1906 are, of course, well known. But there is some evidence that these, if the first to receive official sanction, were not the first which had actually taken place. In his *Twenty-Five Years* Grey definitely states that "plans for naval and military co-operation had . . . begun to be made under Lord Lansdowne in 1905," and suggests that the necessary conversations had been carried on through an intermediary.¹ The testimony of Lord Sydenham who, as Sir George Clarke, served as Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, is similar. He refers to conversations "in Lord Lansdowne's time" which were quite informal and states that

¹ *Twenty-Five Years*, I, p. 76 and cf. p. 74.

Colonel Repington acted as go-between.¹ Robertson is quite positive on the subject. He writes that, with Lansdowne's knowledge, plans for military co-operation with France were discussed by the Director of Military Operations and the French military attaché in London, as far back as 1905. After referring to Grey's statement that these were carried on through an intermediary (he himself mentions Colonel Repington), he adds that, to his personal knowledge, they were also carried on, at least to some extent, direct.²

This testimony cannot be brushed aside. Owing to the peculiar circumstances of his entry into office, it is difficult to believe that Grey ever forgot the date (December 4th, 1905) when Balfour resigned and so is transposing Colonel Repington's known negotiations after this date to a time preceding it. Robertson's statement is quite positive, and so also is Sydenham's, at least so far as the fact of conversations having taken place in Lord Lansdowne's time; though he implies some uncertainty as to Colonel Repington's part as intermediary. All certainty, however, vanishes when the question of the actual date of these conversations is considered. On this point Grey is not very precise. He says that the plans were begun "in 1905, when the German pressure was menacing."³

It might be argued that German pressure was "menacing" to France from the moment when the

¹ *B.D.*, III, No. 221 (a).

² *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, p. 48. See also Haldane, *Autobiography*, pp. 189-90, for a reference to "some general conversations before his time."

³ *Twenty-Five Years*, I, p. 76.

French mission arrived at Fez in February 1905 until the meeting of the Algeciras Conference in January 1906. At times, however, during these months it was more so than at others. One such phase was between March 31st, 1905, when the Emperor William visited Tangiers, and June 6th, when Delcassé resigned. For a number of reasons, however, it seems unlikely that there were conversations at this time.

It seems to be quite clear that Lansdowne, neither now nor later (whatever any other individual, however exalted, may have done), made an offer to France of an offensive and defensive alliance including armed support in case of war with Germany. He did, admittedly, order Bertie¹ to tell Delcassé that the British Government would be prepared to join the French in offering strong opposition to any German demand for a port in Morocco (April 22nd).² Later, he expressed the view that the two Governments "should treat one another with the most absolute confidence" and "keep one another fully informed of everything that came to their knowledge, and should, so far as possible, discuss any contingencies by which they might in the course of events find themselves confronted" (May 17th).³ Into this Cambon and Delcassé appear to have read more than Lansdowne intended, concluding that he was suggesting a general *Entente* amounting in fact to an alliance. But Rouvier, the French Premier, viewed such a possibility with alarm. On May 15th, at a meeting in the Élysée at which Cambon and Barrère had given the impression

¹ British Ambassador in Paris.

² *B.D.*, III, No. 90.

³ *B.D.*, III, No. 94.

that an English alliance was in the offing, his opposition had been most definite. His last words to Cambon and Delcassé as they left were, "Surtout ne vous concertez pas!"¹ Cambon quite clearly felt the difficult position in which Rouvier's attitude placed him, so far as further dealings with Lansdowne were concerned, and he referred to it in a letter to Delcassé on June 1st. After recalling the negative attitude of Rouvier at the Élysée meeting, he continued:

Unless he (i.e. Rouvier) has completely changed his mind, it seems to me difficult for you to respond to overtures which . . . will lead us to an alliance. What could I reply to Lord Lansdowne if he proposes a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff of our armies and navies in view of formidable eventualities? We should expose ourselves to such a suggestion if we entered too readily on a general conversation.²

These words would appear to show that no such conversations had by this date (the end of May) taken place. Moreover, Rouvier explicitly mentioned them as undesirable at the vital meeting of the French Cabinet on June 6th which led to the resignation of Delcassé.³ There might perhaps have been unofficial contact between the French military attaché and the British authorities, although it is extremely improbable, and the scrupulous respect for the French Premier's attitude which Cambon shows in this dispatch make it most

¹ *D.D.F.*, 2nd Ser., VI, No. 480. On this meeting see also Barrère, C., "La Chute de Delcassé," in *Revue des deux Mondes*, Aug. 1st, 1932, pp. 602 ff.

² *D.D.F.*, 2nd Ser., VI, p. 573.

³ On this meeting of the French cabinet, *D.D.F.*, 2nd Ser., VI, Annexe I. See also Paléologue, *Un Grand Tournant*, pp. 349, 351-2.

unlikely that he, at least, would countenance anything of the sort.

Nor is this conclusion shaken by anything in M. Paléologue's recent book which deals with this period and is comparatively rich in military "revelations." Indeed, a remark which M. Paléologue made to Delcassé on April 26th, 1905, may perhaps be taken to suggest that the question of British military intervention in a Franco-German war had not yet been seriously studied by the French General Staff. Delcassé is represented as saying on this occasion that Britain would support France to the end. To this Paléologue replied that British naval help would be of great value but that the matter would be decided on land and, referring to prevalent rumours that the Germans would march in force through Belgium, said that France would be crushed before the English could send a mere 20,000 men.¹ Paléologue may, it is true, have been giving his own strategic impressions, but he appears to have been the frequent recipient of the confidences of Pendezec, at this time Chief of the General Staff, and later in his diary (August 1905)² he is careful to note that Brun (Pendezec's successor) was investigating the military implications of an English alliance.

Such conversations as took place before Balfour resigned on December 4th, 1905, would appear, then, to belong to the months which followed the fall of Delcassé (June 6th). Rouvier soon discovered that the

¹ Paléologue, pp. 307-8. If there had been Conversations, surely this figure would have been higher.

² *Ibid.*, p. 396.

sacrifice of his colleague had not led to a modification of the German attitude. Had it done so, had the Germans, that is, been content with the fall of Delcassé and adopted a conciliatory attitude towards Rouvier, it is hardly likely that the *Entente* would have been transformed, as it undoubtedly was transformed, by the initiation of military conversations between the two partners at the end of this year. The latter were thus the outcome of continued German pressure and threats; for whereas Rouvier in May, knowing that Russia was helpless and the French army in no state for war, regarded military conversations with Britain as likely to precipitate a German attack, he realised, when the sacrifice of Delcassé had apparently made no difference to the German attitude, that he had no choice left but to take the very risks he had declined earlier. Without claiming that Lansdowne was anxious to initiate conversations before June 6th, it is obvious that Rouvier was not ready to agree to them until after that date. Whatever the attitude of Lansdowne, so long as Rouvier was opposed, the conversations could not have taken place.

By July 12th, 1905, Cambon was informing Lansdowne that Rouvier, after all that had happened, was more than ever convinced of the necessity of a close understanding with England, that the two Governments should treat one another with the fullest confidence and that no further steps should be taken without previous discussion.¹ Both powers eventually accepted the idea of a Conference on the Morocco question and it simply

¹ *B.D.*, III, No. 152.

- remained for both to wait on events since the Conference was not actually to meet until January 1906.

It must have been at some time during this period that those military conversations, which have left such slight traces, began. They may not have been unconnected with the substitution of General Brun for Pendevec as Chief of the French General Staff in August 1905. Brun, at all events, had an interesting conversation with M. Paléologue on August 22nd.¹ It was agreed that at least five years must pass before Russia would be in a position to fulfil the military obligations of her alliance with France. The question of an English alliance and the value of English military help was also discussed. Brun stated that he was having the question very secretly studied by Huguet, the military attaché in London, and was of the opinion that England² could disembark 100,000 men at Antwerp between the fifteenth and twentieth day of mobilisation. This army, in co-operation with the Belgian forces, could attack the right flank of the Germans if, as seemed likely, they advanced by the valley of the Meuse in the direction of the Oise. Huguet in his own book of reminiscences admits that he was studying the question of how many men Britain could transport to the Continent on the outbreak of war, during the "autumn" of 1905, but gives the impression that his discussion of this matter with Grierson was at the very end of the year.² Under the 9th November, M. Paléologue reports a four-hour meeting of the Commission Secrète des Instructions de Guerre, at the end of which he was instructed to put in hand a scheme

¹ Paléologue, *loc. cit.*

² Huguet, *Britain and the War*, pp. 4-5.

of relations with the British General Staff and Admiralty, even in the case that Britain should not come out openly as France's ally.¹

It seems reasonable to suppose that this was the date on which the French military authorities decided definitely to establish contact with their opposite numbers in Britain. If so, the military conversations "in Lord Lansdowne's time" must belong to the last fortnight of his tenure of office and so merge imperceptibly into those which we know took place early in the days of Grey. It remains surprising, however, that if, as it seems, Repington was employed as an intermediary before the change of Government in England, he should make no reference whatever in his published reminiscences to the part which he played.

¹ Paléologue, p. 411.

CHAPTER III

THE PLAN OF 1906

The change of Government in England took place about six weeks before the Conference met at Algieras. Both in Paris and Berlin there was naturally much speculation as to whether the substitution of the Liberals and Grey for the Conservatives and Lansdowne would lead to any change in British policy. The Liberals, as a party, were known to have characteristic views, amongst which pacifist tendencies and the idea of non-intervention in Continental affairs had once, at least, been prominent. It was true that they had also, traditionally, a certain bias in favour of Republican France; but it had yet to be shown that this would lead them to continue a policy inaugurated by their predecessors at a moment when to do so might conceivably mean war with Germany. It is quite true that the appearance of the strong "Imperialist" group within the Liberal party, in revolt against many of its traditional principles in external affairs, had been noticed by Cambon in his earliest days at the London Embassy;¹ but the imperialist tide had ebbed considerably since 1899 and, in any case, Campbell-Bannerman, who was at the head of the new Government, had never shown much sympathy towards these

¹ Temperley (ed.), *Studies in Anglo-French History*, p. 149.

tendencies. There were grounds, then, for some French anxiety at the end of 1905. It was enhanced by their knowledge of the enfeebled position in which Russia found herself as a result of the war with Japan. The alarming reports of the French military attaché in St. Petersburg were hardly necessary to show that the military value of the Russian alliance was now at its lowest ebb.¹

These considerations explain, no doubt, a certain change of emphasis now noticeable in the French attitude towards Britain. In the time of Lansdowne one has the impression that it was Britain who was the more determined of the two in resisting the demands of Germany; after his departure France was very soon making pointed inquiries about the new Government's attitude, asking, indeed, outright whether Britain, in certain circumstances, would offer armed support to France.

The conversations on this subject between Grey and Cambon in January 1906 are well known, but some reference to them is essential here. On the 10th Cambon inquired whether the promise of diplomatic support which Lansdowne had made would be forthcoming at Algeciras and whether this "diplomatic support" meant that, if Germany put the matter to the test of war, Britain would afford armed assistance to France. The new Government was thus asked, not simply if it would do all that Lansdowne had undertaken to do, but more. Grey's reply was given in the two interviews with Cambon, on this same occasion and on January 31st.²

¹ See, for instance, *D.D.F.*, 2nd Ser., VII, Nos. 148, 427 and especially 450.

² *B.D.*, III, Nos. 210 () and 219.

Without hesitation he promised diplomatic support at the coming Conference. As to armed support he could make no definite pledge; he could only say that in case of obvious German aggression the country would, he believed, agree to support France in arms. It should be noted that already (January 3rd) he had, through Metternich, warned the German Government that Britain would probably go to the support of France if the latter were wantonly attacked.¹ He thus sought to control the actions of both France and Germany by making the former only hopeful of British support, and the latter believe it probable.

However, when making his statement to Cambon on January 10th, Grey had said that he had no objection to military and naval conversations taking place between properly authorised experts to make provision for the contingency of a war in which England was involved on the side of France. Here again Grey was, apparently, continuing the policy of his predecessor. The only difference (though it was not unimportant) was that, whereas before only naval conversations had been conducted direct by the proper authorities, the military conversations were now to be taken out of the hands of an unofficial British intermediary and to be placed in those of the War Office.

If the disadvantages of this policy were obvious (and in fact were clearly recognised by Campbell-Bannerman at the time²), the military advantages were no less so. If England were ever to fight alongside France some agreed principles of co-operation were essential.

¹ B.D., III, No. 529.

² Spender, *op. cit.*, II, p. 237.

Merely to recognise this possibility and do nothing further was, from the strategic point of view, worse than useless.

Grey, certainly, did not hesitate to implement his statement to Cambon. Soon after the interview of January 10th he sought out Haldane, the new War Minister. In the course of the election then proceeding both happened to be speaking at Berwick in Grey's constituency (January 12th),¹ and after the meeting, in the course of a private talk, Grey mentioned the fears of the French as to a possible German movement in the summer and inquired if there had been any joint consultation with the French military authorities. Haldane at once returned to London. He consulted with the heads of the General Staff and also with the French military attaché, Huguet. In his own words, he "became aware at once that there was a new army problem. It was how to mobilise and concentrate at a place of Assembly to be opposite to the Belgian frontier, a force calculated as adequate (with the assistance of Russian pressure in the East) to make up for the inadequacy of the French armies."²

From this moment the military conversations with France, although begun earlier, were made "official" and for some time were to be the main preoccupation of Grierson, at this time Director of Military Operations. Any account of them must, however, begin with their "unofficial" phase.

According to Grierson's published Diary he was, in December 1905, busily engaged with the problems of

¹ Spender, *op. cit.*, II, p. 252.

² *Before the War*, p. 30.

a possible war with Germany over Morocco. On the 15th, for instance, he had a consultation with Ottley and Ballard of the Admiralty on this subject and between the 18th and 22nd was working on a statement of the forces required for the operations, though¹ no details are supplied.¹ About the 16th or 18th December (he himself was uncertain as to the exact date) he met Huguet, by chance, riding in the Row. The latter spoke of French fears as to an attack by Germany and asked some questions about British war-organisation. Grierson referred him to the Army List which showed it, and also gave the composition on mobilisation of a Division which did not exist in Peace. Huguet also asked if the British had ever considered operations in Belgium and was told that, as a strategic exercise, such had been worked out in the previous spring.²

The two did not meet again, 'apparently, until they began to "converse" officially on January 16th, 1906, but, in the interval, Huguet had taken further steps in another direction. He was on good terms with Colonel C. à Court Repington, at this time military correspondent of *The Times*, and who had, apparently, already acted as an unofficial mediator between the French and British

¹ Macdiarmid, pp. 215 ff.

² B.D., III, No. 211. Paléologue, *op. cit.*, p. 419, reports Grierson as having told Huguet, presumably at this interview, that Britain had a scheme for landing 115,000 men (3 Army Corps and 4 Cavalry Brigades) at Antwerp. The army could cover Brussels between the twelfth and twenty-first days of mobilisation. Britain had also provided that two Divisions drawn from Gibraltar, Malta and Egypt could land at Marseilles on the eighteenth day of mobilisation. (The last two would necessarily have been improvised formations, Dunlop, *Development of the British Army*, p. 246, n. 3.)

military authorities. He was a strong francophil and made no secret of his belief that, if France were attacked by Germany, Britain must go to her support. He was, thus, admirably suited for Huguet's purpose, and accordingly on December 28th the latter expressed his anxieties to him. The French Embassy, said Huguet, was anxious to know what Britain would do if Germany suddenly confronted France with a crisis. The Germans, since it was believed that they could not penetrate the French frontier, would no doubt advance through Belgium and it was hoped that Britain would "stiffen" the Belgians.¹

Repington reported this conversation to Grey, who, so far as military co-operation was concerned, returned a wholly non-committal answer.² Repington also discussed the whole situation with Lord Esher on the 30th,³ and later saw Fisher, busy at the Admiralty with naval dispositions in view of the crisis. Fisher said that he had discussed the matter with the French and only wanted, of them, submarines at Dunkirk, and expressed the opinion that the Germans would defeat the French on land.⁴ He had, as we know, his own views as to the use to be made of the army and these views were shared, or at least sympathetically regarded, by Esher and Sir George Clarke. At all events, on the same day, Sir George suggested to Repington that he should take certain steps at the French Embassy. But at the same time he condemned the idea of the British "joining the French army" and also of their supporting

¹ Repington, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

the Belgian army unless Germany violated Belgian neutrality.¹

It is evident that in London there was already one distinct school of thought—the “Admiralty” school—which favoured the plan of a landing on the German coast. There was also, however, the “War Office” school, which looked for quicker action nearer the main theatre of operations. Grierson certainly told Repington on January 3rd, that he disapproved of the “Fisher-Clarke” plan. Assuming the violation of Belgian neutrality by Germany, the British, he said, could put two Divisions into Namur by the thirteenth day of mobilisation and “all our Field-Army” into Antwerp by the thirty-second.²

Knowing this and aware also of the divergence of opinion between War Office and Admiralty, Repington had a long discussion with Huguet on the 5th. He seems to have emphasised the importance of Belgian neutrality since Huguet gave it as his personal opinion that France would not violate it. But they were uncertain whether a German violation would automatically bring Britain into the field. He condemned the “Fisher-Clarke” plan, preferring British help to be made available either in Belgium, if Germany violated her neutrality, or, if not, on the left of the French line of deployment between Verdun and Mézières.³ We may note his desire for British intervention even though Belgium was not involved; the question of Belgium had a vital bearing on the Conversations throughout.

¹ Repington, p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Two days later, at a further conference with Esher and Clarke, it was resolved that Repington, who, unlike the others, was serving in no official capacity, should sound the French Government through Huguet. Having thus ascertained the French views privately and unofficially, he might pass them on to the British Government which, in any case uncommitted, would be able to continue the conversations or not as it thought fit.¹

Accordingly Repington handed to Huguet a list of questions on which he desired to have a "good French opinion." The latter proceeded to Paris for this purpose, handing in the replies after his return on the 12th. The questions had been submitted to Rouvier (Prime Minister), Etienne (Minister of War), Thomson (Minister of Marine), Brun (C.G.S.) and Brugère (Généralissimo).² It was no doubt this unofficial British *démarche* which encouraged Cambon to mention military conversations to Grey in the interview of January 10th, though, doubtless, he would have done so in any case.

These questions and the French replies will be found set out in full in Repington's own book.³ Here it is perhaps sufficient to summarise what is thus revealed of the French views on joint military action.

They had studied the question of the co-operation of the British army and considered that for this to be most effective it should operate under the same command as the French whether the two armies were employed in the same theatre of operations or not. They emphasised, indeed, the importance of a single command, British at

¹ Repington, pp. 5-6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-10.

sea, French on land. It was also most important that, for the sake of the moral effect, British assistance should make itself felt from the outbreak of hostilities. The French would not violate Belgian territory unless compelled to do so by prior violation on the part of Germany. They supposed, although they had received no official assurance, that Britain would automatically intervene in the event of a violation of Belgium. They placed little reliance on the action of the Belgian army in case of a German invasion; it would probably simply retire on Antwerp protesting against the German action. If it decided to resist, France would propose prompt joint action, but such action could not be defined in advance since it must depend on circumstances. They showed no enthusiasm for the British suggestion of a joint landing on the German coast of 100,000 British and a like number of French. In view of the probable numerical superiority of the Germans, such an operation at the beginning of the war would be risky and only to be attempted in exceptional circumstances.

In brief, the French condemned plans of the Fisher-Clarke type, looked for more or less close British co-operation on land, even if Belgian neutrality were not violated, and insisted on unity of command which should be in French hands.

The Committee of Imperial Defence at once considered the French statement and began on actual plans. At a meeting on January 12th it was proposed to land the British Expeditionary Force at Calais, Boulogne, Dieppe and Havre. About 100,000 men and 42,000 horses, it was calculated, should be available within fourteen

days of the outbreak of war. Ferrying across was to begin on the third day in order to pass over the whole force by the fourteenth.¹

Such a scheme necessarily involved the co-operation of the Admiralty and inevitably, since this was the type of plan he detested, difficulties arose with Fisher. On the 14th Clarke reported him as obdurate; he would reveal no plans to the French and he was not prepared to guarantee the passage of the British forces across the Channel. With his "Baltic" and similar schemes in mind, he wanted, says Repington, to "fight his own war in his own way."²

This plan was no doubt tentative and probably intended merely as a basis for further discussion. Few of its detailed provisions, if it had many, are known and there is, above all, no reference to any intended zone of concentration across the Channel. But it certainly evoked Fisher's opposition and was probably in keeping with the ideas which Grierson had expressed to Repington on January 3rd; Ottley certainly described it as a scheme "settled between the military officers."³ Its main importance perhaps consists in the fact that it served to make perfectly clear to the heads of the War Office the strength of Fisher's characteristic beliefs.

Repington, for his part, regarded "Baltic" schemes as amateur foolery.⁴ He was, in fact, a representative of the school of thought which was eventually to dominate

¹ Repington, p. 11; *B.D.*, III, No. 221 (a) (Note).

² Repington, pp. 11-12.

³ *B.D.*, III, No. 221 (a) (Note). Ottley (Director of Naval Intelligence) so describes it in reporting the meeting of Jan. 12th to Fisher.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

British war-strategy. He was strong for "weight at the decisive point" and believed implicitly in the necessity of making as sure as Britain's means allowed the victory of the French in the first great shock of battle. A far more influential figure was later to share these views. But Repington's prominent, if unofficial, rôle now came to an end. The conversations were made official and direct on January 15th.

When Grierson took over the negotiations, some ground had thus been cleared. He was aware of the general principles of co-operation favoured by the French. He was no less aware, if, indeed, he had not been months before, of the attitude of Fisher towards schemes such as that put forward on January 12th at the Defence Committee. He himself, no doubt, had strong views as to the use to which the Expeditionary Force should be put. These, it is true, can best be assessed, after examining the complete scheme for which he was responsible, but we know that he embarked on the conversations opposed to the strategic ideas favoured by Fisher. But this does not mean that he minimised the importance of British sea-power or believed in close alignment with the French. Further, since the co-operation of the Fleet was in any case essential, prudence may have suggested going as far as possible to meet the views of a powerful and determined sailor with friends literally at Court.

The conversations which now took place between Grierson and Huguet have left very few traces. They were apparently conducted verbally and such notes as are preserved in the War Office archives are of a technical

and detailed nature.¹ The conversations which were carried on simultaneously with the Belgian military authorities are much better documented.² Furthermore it is probable that the latter negotiation was not concerned with a separate or alternative plan, but was an essential part of the one plan now made for military action on the Continent. This must be discussed more fully later, but it is perhaps advisable to bear this possibility in mind at the outset.

Certainly such information as we possess concerning the Grierson-Huguet conversations is concerned with the movement of the British forces across the Channel, the landing at certain French ports and rail-transport thence to an unspecified zone of concentration. The only technical note (a French note dated February 13th) printed in full in the *British Documents* deals with these questions and, judging by their titles, the others were probably of a similar character. In the note in question Boulogne, Calais and Cherbourg are mentioned as ports of disembarkation and to these the British were to have their own reserved lines of communication. They were, further, granted certain rights in France to requisition supplies and remounts and to billet troops. They were to have entire control over their own lines of communication, except that the trains were to be run by French personnel.³

On March 2nd and 3rd, after the negotiations had been in progress for some weeks, Grierson himself paid

¹ *B.D.*, III, p. 169, Ed. note. For a sample note, *ibid.*, App. D, p. 438.

² *B.D.*, III, pp. 179 ff.

³ *B.D.*, II, App. D.

a visit to France. Accompanied by Huguet, he inspected the docks at Boulogne and Calais and also landing-places, sheds and camp-sites. Later, on March 10th, this time accompanied by Robertson, he again crossed the Channel, going via Lille, Valenciennes and Charleroi to Namur and through the Ardennes.¹ From January 30th to May 3rd railway time-tables were in preparation.

The above is, in brief, the sum of our knowledge of the Grierson-Huguet conversations. Apparently they were concerned for the most part with technical details which leave the Expeditionary Force only on its way to the assumed area of operations. What this was can, it seems probable, only be discovered by reference to the conversations which were proceeding at the same time with the Belgian Chief of Staff, Ducarne.

On the same day (January 16th) as he began his conversations with Huguet, Grierson wrote to Barnardiston, then British military attaché at Brussels, saying that he had been empowered by Grey to ask the latter to consult with the Belgian military authorities "as to the manner in which, in case of need, British assistance could be most effectually afforded to Belgium for the defence of her neutrality." He added that Barnardiston was to tell Ducarne that, in this case, the British were prepared to put into the field four Cavalry Brigades, two Army Corps and one Division of Mounted Infantry. The total numbers would be about 105,000; they were to be ferried over to the *French* coast, to Calais, Boulogne, Dieppe and Havre, railing afterwards "if necessary" to

¹ Macdiarmid, p. 216 *B.D.*, III, p. 196(8) for his conclusions as to detraining-stations after the latter journey.

Belgium. But when command of the sea was assured, the base would be changed to Antwerp.¹

The negotiations between Barnardiston and Ducarne continued for some weeks and it is possible to follow them almost step by step in the correspondence printed by the editors of the *British Documents*.² In addition, some of the relevant Belgian documents and even diagrams and sketch-maps of great interest have also been published. During the occupation of Brussels during the War the Germans obtained access to official archives and some papers bearing on these military conversations with Britain were published in an attempt to prove to the world that the transaction amounted to a violation of Belgian neutrality.³ It is thus possible to reconstruct in considerable detail the main features of the plan eventually adopted.

Careful provision was made, based on the time-table for the arrival of British troops at the French ports, to transport them by rail to detraining-stations in Belgium. This called for precise calculation and the progress made obviously depended on progress made by Grierson in his negotiations with Huguet. Naturally, the main object was to make the British troops available in Belgium as quickly and in as great strength as possible. There can be little doubt that the transport details arranged

¹ *B.D.*, III, No. 217 (b).

² *B.D.*, III, pp. 179 ff.

³ For the Belgian documents, see Schwertfeger, B. (ed.), *Die Belgischen Dokumente zur Vorgeschichte der Europäischen Politik, zweiter Kommentarband (Der geistige Kampf um die Verletzung der belgischen Neutralität)*, pp. 95 ff. There is a general study by C. Hosse, *Die englisch-belgischen Aufmarschpläne gegen Deutschland vor dem Weltkriege*. This includes additional documents and facsimiles of sketch-maps and transport-tables.

with Huguet were designed to serve this plan of concentration in Belgium, even if they may possibly have served another.

In the conversations with Ducarne, Calais, Boulogne and Cherbourg were eventually fixed as the ports of disembarkation and these, incidentally, are the three ports mentioned in the document submitted to Grierson by the French General Staff and which has been mentioned above.¹

The British zone of concentration in Belgium was fixed with reference to two possibilities:

1. A German advance on Antwerp. (Grierson considered this to be an "eccentric" operation which the Germans were not likely to undertake.²)

2. A German advance through the Ardennes. (Grierson apparently considered this more probable and, as we have seen, he made himself personally acquainted with the relevant detraining area.)

In each case detraining-stations were so selected as to ensure this operation being carried out under cover of the Belgian army in its positions and to place the British forces in a situation from which they could act most decisively. In the first event the British would detrain in the triangle Brussels-Aerschot-Louvain in rear of the right flank of the Belgians placed between Turnhout and near Diest. If attacked by the Germans, this position would be suitable for action against their left flank. In the second event, detraining-stations were selected in the

¹ See Ducarne's report in Schwertfeger, pp. 101 ff. Hosse, *Anlage* 10 (d).

² B.D., III, p. 192 (5).

triangle Namur-Ciney-Dinant, on the assumption that the Belgian army would be in position south-east of the Meuse somewhere between Ciney and Durbuy. The strategical situation in this theatre was held to be a very favourable one with the Belgians on the Meuse between Liège and Namur and with four French Corps in the vicinity of Mézières.¹

Great emphasis was laid by the Belgians on the need for the British to arrive in the theatre of operations as promptly as possible. It was finally decided that the disembarkation of the 1st Corps would be completed on the tenth day, that of the 2nd on the fifteenth. The 1st, whichever plan was followed, would arrive at its detrain-ing-stations in Belgium on the eleventh day, the 2nd on the sixteenth. It was hoped, however, that this might be speeded up; Ducarne wishing to have the British troops alongside the Belgians between the eleventh and twelfth day.²

The supreme command of the Anglo-Belgian forces was left undecided, though the Belgians apparently felt that it should be in their hands.³ In addition, careful provision was made for the exchange between the two armies of maps and of illustrations of uniforms, for the appointment of liaison officers and interpreters and for the provisioning of the British troops.

Such were the main provisions of the scheme for military co-operation now worked out by the British and Belgian authorities. It is interesting to observe that, in spite of the war-game which Grierson had ordered in the

¹ For these alternatives, see *B.D.*, III, pp. 190-2 (4) and p. 197 (10).

² Schwertfeger, pp. 105-7.

³ Hosse, *Anlage*, 10 (a).

spring of 1905, it was not apparently anticipated that the Germans would make a wide sweep from the direction of Aix-la-Chapelle north of the River Meuse. It may, on the other hand, have been thought that the concentration of the British troops alongside the Belgians on the Meuse (Plan II) would be applicable in such an event, especially as Grierson was encouraged to believe that Liège and Namur could hold out for a month. Even so it is curious that Grierson did not pay more attention than he appears to have done to Ducarne's uneasiness about a possible German advance through the Maastricht "appendix" which would have turned the lines of the Meuse and the Maastricht Canal.¹ Possibly Grierson was in this connection deferring to official French views as to the most probable line of the German advance. The French Plan XV of 1903 was still in force in spite of the strong suspicion that the Germans would advance over Belgian territory. It is true that the Plan was modified in or about March 1906 and the French line of deployment extended further to the left, but this was far from being adequate to encounter as wide a sweep as that actually made in 1914 by the Germans.² Grierson thus seems to have been willing to accept the French view as to the probable German line of advance. It may perhaps be conjectured that, had the Anglo-Belgians been forced back by a strong German movement across the Meuse, their object would have been to hold the enemy away from Antwerp and the Belgian coast. Certainly in the case of neither plan for British concen-

¹ *B.D.*, III, p. 198 (10).

² *Les Armées Françaises*, I, 1, p. 10.

tration in Belgium is it possible to speak of "alignment with the French army."

Let us note, too, the emphasis laid on Antwerp as the eventual British base. Sea-power was to be used, if to a much less extent than Fisher, for example, would have preferred, to place the British Force as near to the heart of the enemy's power as was compatible with safety. Grierson, as we know, condemned the "Fisher-Clarke" type of scheme for a wider movement of this nature.¹ But the plan which he had sketched out to Repington on January 3rd² and that which he now made in collaboration with Ducarne went much further to meet the views of the other school than a plan to concentrate the Expeditionary Force on the left of the French armies. As strategy it was more "amphibious," making a greater use of British sea-power, using that power in fact to enable Allied forces to menace the flank or rear of German troops seeking to operate farther west.

¹ See above, p. 40.

² See above, p. 40.

CHAPTER IV

TWO PLANS OR ONE?

This question of alignment with the French is important in another connection. Were there two plans made in 1906, the one now under discussion and another which envisaged a zone of concentration for the British in France? It seems likely that there was but one, though it is not possible to say so with certainty.¹

There is, however, no definite evidence that any zone of concentration in France for the British forces was decided upon at this time. It is true that the Grierson-Huguet conversations were conducted verbally and that the official written records are scanty.² But it is difficult to believe that, if such a zone had been actually fixed, some hint as to its locality would not appear in the sources, either official or otherwise, which are available. It is true that Huguet suggested, in his conversation with Repington on January 5th, that the British should take up a position on the left of the French line between Verdun and Mézières.³ Again, M. Paléologue reports Brun, the French Chief of Staff, as saying, on January 13th, that he thought the British might be able, from

¹ P. Kluge in his *Heeresaufbau und Heerespolitik Englands*, pp. 151-4, seeks to show that there was only one plan. Although I believe that he is right, I do not think that it can be proved with the available information.

² *B.D.*, III, p. 169 (Ed. note).

³ Repington, p. 5.

the twelfth day, to take up a position from Mons to Maubeuge with their reserves around Valenciennes.¹ But these statements, it will be noticed, not only mention different zones of concentration, but fall in the period before the conversations were made direct and official. In this connection it is interesting to read M. Paléologue's report (dated September 12th, 1906) of a conversation between Grierson and Brun at the recent manœuvres of the 1st and 2nd Army Corps.² Grierson is said to have been keenly interested in the point at which the French, *dès maintenant*, would like the British contingent to join their line. Was it to be on the Aisne, near Vouziers, on the Oise, near Hirson, or on the Sambre, near Aulnoye? He expressed a personal preference for a position between the Meuse and Sambre, or, better, on the Sambre itself from Mézières to Hirson. Thence an advance might be made towards Namur and Dinant. It was very important, said Grierson, from the point of view of public opinion at home, that the British should operate on Belgian soil, since it was principally as guarantor and defender of Belgian neutrality that Great Britain would intervene in the war. Brun replied that according to the French dispositions the British would prolong the French left wing on the banks of the Aisne near Vouziers. But in case operations in Belgium were necessary, the British would be the first to enter that country.

From this it would seem either that no zone of concentration in France and no plan involving alignment with the French had been arranged earlier in the year,

¹ Paléologue, p. 424.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 433 ff.

or, possibly, that a new zone was now necessary in view of the modification of the French Plan XV which we know was made in or about March 1906.¹ But if it was the latter it is difficult to see how the British could prolong the French left wing by concentrating near Vouziers. Moreover, at about the same time, Grierson was discussing with Ducarne a plan for transporting by rail 100,000 British troops from either Belgian or French ports to the region north of the Sambre between Mons and Charleroi. Presumably no such plan of concentration could have been made earlier in 1906 if it was thought necessary to discuss it with Ducarne in the September of this year.

Grierson's reported statements in this conversation on British public opinion and Belgian neutrality are interesting. The question of Belgian neutrality had an obvious and intimate bearing on the military conversations throughout. In 1902 Lord Salisbury had laid it down as a principle that whether or not Britain would honour its treaty obligations in case of a violation of Belgian neutrality was a question which only the Government of the day could decide when the time came. All that could be said in anticipation was that the fulfilment of our treaty obligations would "follow not precede the national inclination." This no doubt was true enough; but the action of any British Government could be reasonably well forecast and, as Huguet told Repington, the French had always supposed that a violation of Belgian neutrality by Germany would bring Britain

¹ *Les Armées Françaises*, I, 1, p. 10.

² Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, p. 44.

automatically into the field.¹ Nor were they far wrong. But this was not the subject of Cambon's inquiries of Grey in January 1906. He asked, not if Britain would uphold, as against Germany, her treaty obligations with regard to Belgium, but whether Britain would offer armed support to France in the event of German aggression. It was in view of this latter possibility that Grey had permitted the military conversations to proceed under official auspices.

Thus the British military authorities had presumably to consider the case of a Franco-German war in which Belgium was left neutral and unassailed. Although there is no positive statement to this effect in so many words in the *British Documents* there are several where the British assistance to France is stated without any qualification concerning Belgian neutrality. Indeed this qualification appears only in connection with the Belgian conversations; a German violation of Belgian neutrality was in fact the premise on which these conversations were based.²

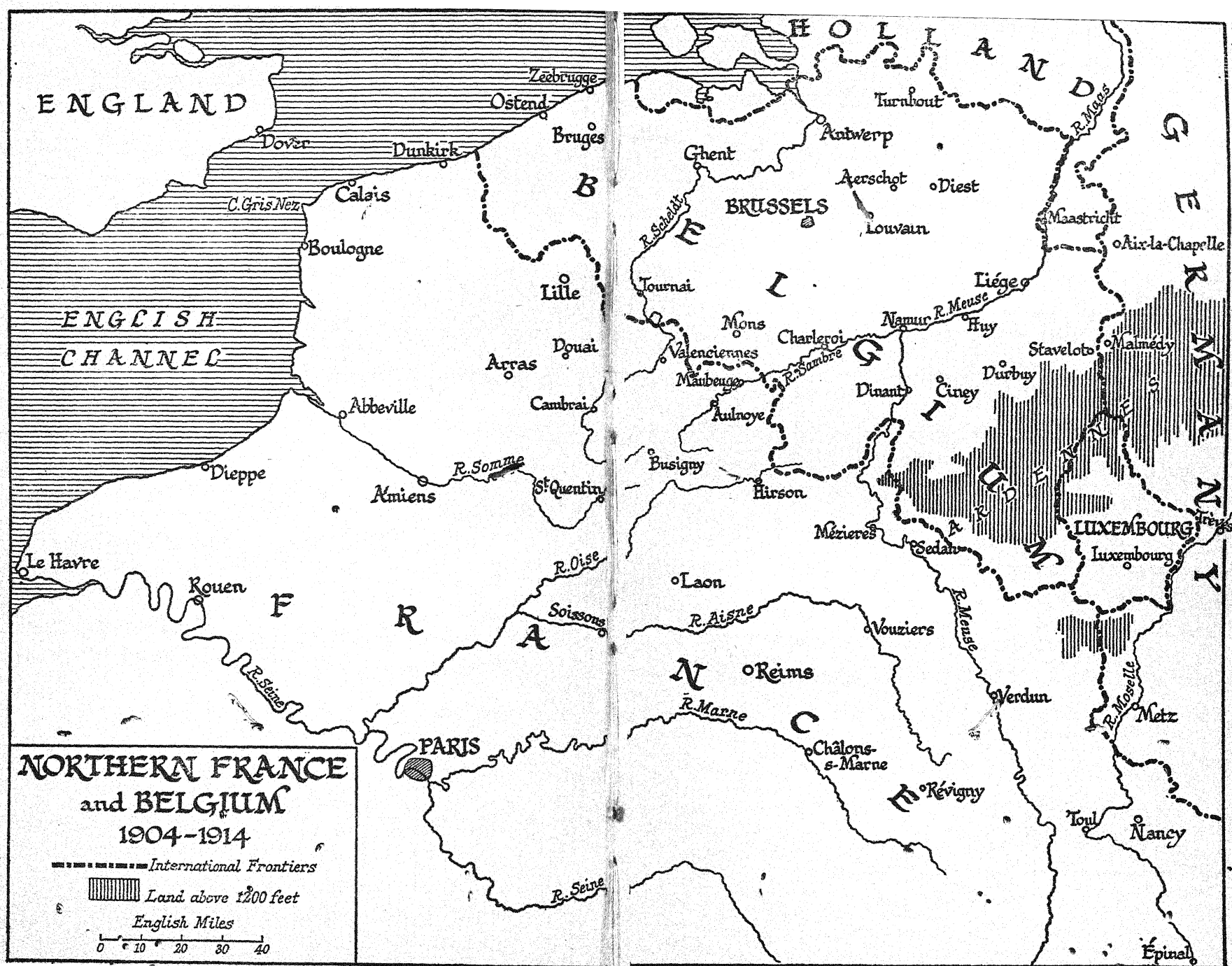
In any Franco-German war there were three military possibilities:

1. A German advance through Belgium.
2. A German attempt to find a way through the strong French line along the Franco-German frontier.
3. A German violation of the neutrality of Switzerland.³

¹ Repington, p. 5.

² *B.D.*, III, No. 214 and No. 217 (b).

³ This possibility engaged the attention of both Pendevec and Brun in 1905. See Paléologue, pp. 372 and 396. Pendevec in June 1905 expressed a preference for a Swiss rather than an English alliance, since it would allow of a French offensive into Bavaria and Swabia on the lines of Moreau's campaign of 1800.



ENGLAND

ENGLISH
CHANNEL

NORTHERN FRANCE and BELGIUM 1904-1914

----- International Frontiers
Land above 1200 feet
English Miles
0 10 20 30 40

These three contingencies had all, presumably, to be taken into consideration in 1906, though all three could scarcely arise at once. But though they were all possible, one, that is the first, stood out unmistakably as the most probable. It had been considered so for years by the British military authorities. It can scarcely have escaped the notice of the French and, according to M. Paléologue, the sensational revelations of the masked "Avenger" had, in recent years, pointed definitely in this direction.¹ The French, it is true, appear to have had doubts until 1914 about the strength, speed and length of radius of this immense turning-movement; they cannot be said, in view of Plan XVII, to have ever appreciated the seriousness of the menace which nearly destroyed them, but the possibility of a German violation of Belgian neutrality can never have been absent from the thoughts of any one responsible for war-preparation either in this country or in Paris.

It involved, however, a subsidiary but important question which gave rise from time to time to some uncertainty. What would be the attitude of Belgium? Would she actively resist or would she merely formally object and leave it at that? This not only to some extent hamstrung British diplomacy as, for instance, in August 1914, but influenced military policy also. If the Belgians did not offer resistance, British troops

¹ See his *Un Prélude à l'Invasion de Belgique* (1904) (in *Revue des deux Mondes*, Oct. 1st, 1932 and later published in book form). The story is also told in *Un Grand Tournant*. It is fair to add that strong doubts exist in Germany about this "Avenger." In any case, surely no actual betrayal of German plans was necessary to suggest this obvious plan of campaign.

could not immediately be concentrated in that country, because Belgian co-operation was essential for this operation. Grierson, for instance, on February 27th, 1906, inquired of Barnardiston whether the Belgians would fight if the Germans only marched through Luxembourg. Barnardiston thought that they would and that, though there were those who would "counsel sitting still," the army at least was anxious to "act vigorously against any violator of their neutrality."¹

If this was so, though three different campaigns were possible, one was easily the most probable and it was this with which Grierson, Huguet, Barnardiston and Ducarne were all concerned in the early months of 1906. The British expected the Germans to advance through Belgium; they assumed, though they could not be absolutely sure, that the Belgians would resist and for this purpose a plan was evolved to concentrate the British Expeditionary Force in one of two zones in Belgium. There remained, however, the doubt whether the Belgians would resist and possibly, therefore, a zone of concentration, in France and perhaps near the Franco-Belgian frontier, was chosen for this contingency.

It is possible, but there is little or no evidence to which one can point. There are of course various passages in the *British Documents* which suggest that British intervention was not conditional upon a violation of Belgian neutrality. Thus, when Sanderson, on January 15th, was informing Grierson that Grey was willing for military conversations to be undertaken, he mentioned both contingencies; military assistance to

¹ *B.D.*, III, p. 192 (5) and p. 193 (6).

France with no qualification and assistance to Belgium if her neutrality were violated by Germany.¹ Ottley did the same in reporting to the Admiralty the plan discussed at the Committee of Imperial Defence on January 12th.² Again, in his Memorandum on the military conversations of November/6th, 1911, Lord Nicholson made no mention of Belgian neutrality, but simply spoke of the conversations as having been sanctioned in view of the possibility of rendering military assistance to France "in the event of an unprovoked attack on that power by Germany."³

This, however, is not conclusive proof that a plan for British concentration in France was actually worked out. Indeed it is impossible to find any. Lord Haldane in *Before the War* describes the French as wanting to know in 1906 if England could send 100,000 men to protect the Belgian frontier of France in case Germany should seek to enter France in that way. Assured of such British assistance, the French could concentrate on meeting any German attack farther south.⁴ But Haldane does not state exactly where the British "protection" of this frontier was to be staged; it need not necessarily have been on French soil.

More specific, admittedly, is a statement by Lord Sydenham (Sir George Clarke), but one drawn up twenty-one years after 1906. In questioning Grey's statement in *Twenty-Five Years* that "all regular members of the Committee of Imperial Defence had all the information" about the military conversations, he states

¹ B.D., III, No. 214.

² B.D., III, No. 221 (b).

³ B.D., III, No. 221 (a), p. 186.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

that the question never came to him officially and he only heard quite informally of what was going on. But he thought that, amongst other things decided, "the position assigned to our contingent in the French battle-line was marked on the map."¹ There could scarcely be a French battle-line in Belgium.

Interesting as it is, this statement must be used with care. Let us remember its date (1927); let us note also that he is not talking of the early months of 1906 specifically but of the whole period which ended with his departure from the Committee of Imperial Defence in September 1907, and, finally, that he heard of these things only "informally" and that he "thought" that this and other decisions were reached.

Finally we may notice in this connection a reported statement by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman in April 1907. He had seriously alarmed Clemenceau by remarking that he did not think English public opinion would allow of British troops being employed on the Continent of Europe. Clemenceau wondered if the Prime Minister was unaware of the military conversations during the acute stages of the Morocco crisis, "when it had been contemplated that in certain eventualities 115,000 British troops would be employed in Belgium or elsewhere in support of France." This unfortunately is a report of what Clemenceau said, probably, but not certainly his exact words. It will be noticed that he puts first the employment of British troops in *Belgium*, though he adds "or elsewhere"; whether this phrase meant anything or not cannot be

¹ *B.D.*, III, No. 221 (2).

decided; but if it did, why should he not have said "or France"?¹

It might be claimed that Belgium, which neither Grey nor Cambon mentioned in the interviews of January 10th and 31st, was really the key at this time of British policy, certainly of British military policy. Britain would consider the possibility of giving armed support to France—but in defence of Belgian neutrality and preferably in Belgium. In his conversations with Cambon, Grey, as in duty bound, emphasised nothing more strongly than the importance of public opinion. He knew that any British Government which went to war must do so with a united nation behind it. For this purpose it must have a good "case." What better could be found than to fight to uphold the pledged word of the country and at the same time one of the country's traditional aims, i.e. to prevent Antwerp, the Belgian and the Channel ports falling into the hands of a hostile and great Power? More than once in later years Haldane stressed the importance which he attached to precisely this object in 1906. Moreover, in the January of that year the *Entente* was still not two years old, and though Grey might say that the British public would be strongly moved in favour of France in case of a German attack, this was, after all, only his personal opinion. It was far easier for him or anyone else to assess the probable public attitude on the question of Belgian neutrality and on an interest, the vital nature of which could be appreciated by a schoolboy.

Calculations of the military probabilities and of

¹ On this episode, see *B.D.*, VI, Nos. 9-14.

political expediency thus suggested a single plan, that of a British concentration in Belgium. For this, conversations with Huguet and active French co-operation were by no means superfluous, they were indeed essential. Since it was held to be unsafe, before complete command of the sea was assured, to attempt disembarkation at Antwerp or at other Belgian ports, it was necessary to use French ports, Boulogne, Calais and Cherbourg. Though the British base was eventually to be Antwerp, in the early stages the whole success of the operation depended on the efficient collaboration of the French. But nevertheless, in 1906, the rôle of the French military authorities was the subsidiary, if important one of passing on the British Expeditionary Force to Belgium.

In one other way the French were possibly to co-operate. We have noticed already that the projected Anglo-Belgian concentration on the Meuse (Plan II) was considered sound partly because of the anticipated presence of a French army of four Corps between Mézières and Sedan.¹ The French Plan XV of 1903 was modified, apparently in March 1906, by a provision for the formation of a Fifth Army assembled round Révigny in face of an enemy offensive which might be expected to the north of Verdun. The official history of the French armies indicates as the reason for this change, information received concerning German intentions which made more and more probable their violation of Belgian neutrality.² The same anticipations, of course, lay at the basis of the Barnardiston-Ducarne plan.

¹ See above, p. 49.

² *Les Armées Françaises*, I, 1, p. 10.

• It is impossible to say whether this variant of the French plan was made in view of the projected Anglo-Belgian concentration lower down the Meuse or vice versa. In either case, though not in close contact, the French were left supporting their Allies' plan, having, it is interesting to note, provided a new formation to occupy much the same ground as that suggested by Huguet to Repington on January 5th as a desirable zone of concentration for the British Expeditionary Force.¹

This plan for operations in Belgium is interesting in another connection. It was an essentially British plan, British in character and in the interests which it was primarily intended to secure. It does not, of course, necessarily follow that it was antipathetic to the French, although there is abundant evidence that they had a strong desire to secure the supreme command of an Anglo-French force (impossible in this case) and spoke in favour of alignment with their own armies. But the plan reflects unmistakably the relative position at this time of the two partners in the *Entente*. In 1906 it is certain that Great Britain was the predominant partner. At this moment the Franco-Russian Alliance probably possessed less military value than it ever had done or was to do again before 1917. The French military attaché in Petersburg had left his Government under no delusions² and none can have been entertained either in Berlin. This fact, and the unpreparedness for war of France herself during 1905, had led Rouvier to do his utmost to be accommodating towards Germany. By the end of 1905, however, he was reaching the point

¹ Repington, p. 5.

² See above, p. 35.

when further "accommodation" must begin to read "object surrender." He had therefore to consider precisely what he had dreaded in May and June, that is to say, military and naval conversations with Britain. The change of Government in Britain in view of the importance to France that Grey should at least offer as much as Lansdowne impelled him further in the same direction. If it would be an exaggeration to say that France approached Britain as a humble suppliant in January 1906, it is nevertheless true that she was not so situated as to be able to dictate the terms of co-operation, particularly of military co-operation, the more so as a Liberal Government now ruled in London.

The French, in any case surprised at the ease with which Grey agreed to the conversations,¹ were no doubt thankful to receive a conditional offer of military help even if it was of the type which, if we may so put it, Britain would have adopted if France had not existed! If, as has been well said, "with General Grierson at the War Office a British force for the defence of the northern ports was a controllable factor,"² it was surely because this expressed the contemporary position of Britain in the *Entente*. Of this connection Britain still supplied the guiding hand. This general situation was not, we may note, to remain unaltered. The Tsardom was soon to rise from its knees. The preparedness for war of France was certainly not to decline. Above all, with the passage of time, she began to feel for various reasons more sure of Britain even though a Liberal Government still sat in Downing Street.

¹ Huguet, p. 6.
B.A.C.

² Dunlop, *Development of the British Army*, p. 246.

CHAPTER V

A NEW ARMY AND AN INTERLUDE

I

Whatever plan or plans were elaborated in the early months of 1906, they were not destined to be put into effect. On April 17th, Grierson was writing to Barnardiston that he was afraid that, for the present, all chance of "our little plans coming off" was at an end.¹ The Algeciras Conference led, in fact, to a *détente* in Franco-German relations and the European situation once again entered on a temporary period of calm after the alarms of 1905. But this was not the end of the military conversations; it was, rather, the occasion for a new beginning.

The crisis of December 1905-January 1906 was in itself the motive cause of those great changes now initiated in British army policy with which the name of Lord Haldane is permanently associated. More fortunate than Mr. Brodrick or Arnold-Forster, Haldane had a clear object for which to prepare. In one of his books he confesses that, when confronted in January 1906 with the possibility of having to send troops to the Continent, he felt himself to be faced with a new army problem.² It was to its solution that he now devoted his energies and his

¹ B.D., III, p. 200 (13).

² *Before the War*, p. 30.

work at the War Office (1905-12) was largely based on this conception of his duty. Hence the creation of an Expeditionary Force of six Divisions for the specific purpose of rapid intervention in a Franco-German war.

The possibility of such intervention was now, in fact, officially recognised by the War Office. Early in 1906, the Operations Directorate drew up a new "Memorandum on the Military Forces required for Overseas Warfare."¹ For the first time in such statements "war in alliance with France against Germany" was discussed and "as an eventuality to be seriously considered." The opinion was also expressed that it was upon land-operations in Europe that the successful issue of the war would mainly depend. Presumably "land operations" by the British was implied and as soon as this principle was accepted, an important decision as to contingent war-strategy had been made. One should perhaps say, rather, made at the War Office. This view was the antithesis of amphibious warfare after the Fisher plan and some years had yet to pass before it was officially accepted in the Committee of Imperial Defence. Little less important was the emphasis laid in the same Memorandum on the importance of prompt intervention by the Expeditionary Force on the outbreak of war. And Haldane was to prepare, not simply to intervene, but to do so quickly.

It is not within the scope of this book to describe the process of building up this Force, and it has, in any case, been done already.² Nevertheless, it is essential

¹ Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, pp. 28-9.

² By Col. J. K. Dunlop in *The Development of the British Army, 1899-1914*, London, 1938.

to remember what Haldane was achieving before 1912; it is the inseparable background of the later history of the military conversations with France. In the early months of 1906 Grierson and others had spoken of sending immediately some 100,000 British troops to the Continent; but, in view of the state of British army organisation at that time, one is bound to wonder what the character and effectiveness of this force would have been.¹ In August 1914 Great Britain was in fact able to send four Divisions promptly to France fully prepared to take part as they did in the opening battles. In 1906 this could not have been done. Thus it was Haldane's rôle to enable his country to perform with efficiency some such task as it had promised to perform at the beginning of 1906.

Nor does the importance of the new era at the War Office end here. Just as Haldane postulated war with Germany and British participation in Continental warfare, so he inevitably turned the minds of the British leaders of the day in this direction. This fostered certain tendencies of which he, doubtless, did not approve. One was the agitation for compulsory service always closely related to the German "peril"—if we were to intervene on the Continent should it not be on a Continental scale? But it led to others to which he can hardly, in logic, have objected and there is no evidence that he did so. If the British army were, in alliance with the French, to meet the Germans in combat, must it not be so trained and equipped as to be able to do these things effectively? During these years the British

¹ On this point cf. Dunlop, p. 242, n. 3.

army was in fact prepared, in its peace exercises and in other ways, for campaigns which were not to be fought on the North-West Frontier of India.¹

The attention of this army was gradually being turned in a particular direction. It is shown, for instance, by the visits paid by prominent British officers no longer, as before, to the old battlefields of the last Franco-German war, but to the probable site of the next. A lengthy list of such visits might without difficulty be drawn up. French, Grierson, Rawlinson, Robertson and Smith-Dorrien all during the years after 1905 made one or more such journeys.² As for Sir Henry Wilson, it has been calculated that he visited the relevant frontier districts on no less than seventeen occasions before war broke out.³

Partly, no doubt, it was a matter of almost academic routine for these men to seek out the most recent battlefields of Europe. But to visit the probable site of the next phase of the Franco-German war was, if a wise precaution, a sign no less of the line their thoughts were taking. For that matter there are numerous examples of leading British soldiers of the day expressing their conviction during the years which followed 1906 that a war with Germany was inevitable. French was certain of it in 1908.⁴ Haig, when he became Director of Military Training in August 1906, was helping to pre-

¹ In this connection see some interesting pages in Kluge, pp. 184 ff.; especially for contemporary German impressions.

² For some visits by Grierson and Robertson, see above, pp. 19, 46. For other instances, Robertson, *Private to F.M.*, p. 143; Smith-Dorrien, p. 360; Maurice, *Rawlinson*, p. 91; Macdiarmid, p. 241.

³ Kluge, p. 192.

⁴ French, "1914," p. 8.

pare for the war which he now considered probable and was under no delusions as to its potential magnitude.¹ When he became Chief of Staff in India (August 1909) he worked out a scheme for the use of the Indian army outside that country in the event of a world war.² Rawlinson, we are told, became convinced during his two years at Aldershot (1907-9) of the imminence of a great war and decided in consequence not to carry out his intention to leave the Regular Army.³ It is to the same period that Smith-Dorrien refers when remarking that most soldiers now felt that war must come soon.⁴ In 1910, Cowans accepted Haldane's offer of the Director-Generalship of the Territorial Forces partly because he had for some time realised that war with Germany was only a question of time.⁵ And no doubt this list might be extended.

At the Staff College, it seems that what was fast becoming a fixed idea amongst the higher officers found an appropriate place also. Whilst Rawlinson was Commandant (December 1903-December 1906) we learn that there was not only regular study of the Russo-Japanese War then in progress, and of the problems of the North-West Frontier, but also "of another Franco-German war in which we might be involved."⁶ Wilson succeeded him and we may assume that he gave full rein to his characteristic predilections. Indeed, it was probably no longer simply "another Franco-German

¹ Duff Cooper, *Haig*, I, p. 105 (cf. pp. 102-3) and p. 109.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19.

³ Maurice, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 360.

⁵ Chapman-Huston and Rutter, *Cowans*, I, pp. 172-3.

⁶ Maurice, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

war in which we might be involved" but one in which a particular method of British intervention was expounded. Much attention was given to continental warfare and on visits to the 1870-1 battlefields, the ground which Wilson was beginning to know so well was carefully studied. At Camberley, "below the ascending woods, where he so often stood, there lay in lieu of cricket-fields and polo-grounds, the curving reaches of the Meuse and the blood-stained flats of Flanders."¹ The Commandant himself sought out Foch, his opposite number at the École Supérieure de Guerre, and, refusing to be rebuffed, made a thorough study of its methods.² There can have been little to be learnt here of Indian or African warfare; the ground, though as yet untorn, lay nearer at hand. Nor did Wilson's successor, Robertson, hide very successfully his belief in the identity of the "Enemy."³

That most British soldiers from Lord Roberts⁴ downwards were fast becoming convinced of the inevitability of war with Germany is, no doubt, true enough. To say, however, that there was a widespread conspiracy in high military quarters to bring it on would be preposterous. As in the case of Haldane, it was the plain duty of these men to weigh up the possibilities of the contemporary world-situation, over which, it may be added, the British Government had not exclusive control. But it is nevertheless clear that in such an atmosphere as this military

¹ Callwell, I, pp. 73-4, quoting from Esher's *Tragedy of Lord Kitchener*.

² Callwell, I, pp. 77-8.

³ *From Private to F.M.*, pp. 177 ff.

⁴ He recognised the German "peril" c. 1906-7, Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, I, pp. 23-4.

relations with the potential ally would not become any less attractive. And when we learn that in 1914, before it was certain that Great Britain would intervene, it was the intention of numerous officers at the War Office to resign and place their services at the disposal of France,¹ we are entitled to wonder exactly how objective the military view of the situation had by, then at least, become.

Nevertheless, even though it might be agreed that war with Germany was inevitable, there still remained ample room for differences of opinion as to the precise method of British intervention. We have already noted the wide divergence of view in 1906 between Fisher at the Admiralty and others, with what might perhaps be called the "War Office" (although in view of French's alleged attitude at that time there was no complete unanimity even here²). The Admiralty continued to be faithful to its own characteristic ideas until the autumn of 1911. But it was not until about the same time, so far as it is possible to judge, that the "War Office" for its part reached anything like unanimity on the method of intervention. That it did so then was due in large part to the influence of Wilson; but it is doubtful whether he ever really convinced all his colleagues or superiors.

Thus Kitchener, in 1909, told Rawlinson confidentially that semi-official military conversations were proceeding

¹ Chapman-Huston and Rutter, *op. cit.*, I, p. 275. Cowans is said to have told Asquith of this. Kluke calls attention (p. 196) to the significant contact in the last days of peace between Wilson and opposition leaders and other influential persons. Curious as these activities are, they do not explain the relative unanimity of the nation on the question of intervention. See Callwell, I, pp. 153 ff.

² For French's approval of the Fisher-Clarke plans, see Repington, p. 12.

between the British General Staff and the French. The object was a combined plan of campaign if Germany attacked France. But Kitchener did not like it; we should be "tacked on" to a French plan which might not suit us.¹ And when we find Kitchener criticising Wilson, when the latter was at the Staff College, for forming a "school," we can readily judge what the school was and the reasons for Kitchener's anxiety.² The latter may have felt what it is surprising to find that others apparently did not feel, that the British had recently had rather more experience of serious warfare than their potential allies who, indeed, had scarcely looked on the "stricken field" since 1871.

II

So far as actual military conversations with France are concerned, there begins in May 1906 a long period of comparative obscurity only ended, indeed, with Wilson's appointment as Director of Military Operations in August 1910. Such is the paucity of evidence that a continuous and chronological narrative is almost out of the question. The evidence is barely sufficient to reveal what were the main lines of development. We arrive on much firmer ground with Wilson's appointment and it is fortunately the case that the most important changes which remain to be noticed took place in his time.

The years between 1906 and 1910 were not unimportant in the relations of the Powers. The military strength and general preparedness for war of France, for instance, were certainly not diminishing. Her morale,

¹ Maurice, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

² Callwell, I, pp. 83-4.

no less, was recovering from the shocks of 1905. For one thing the Franco-Russian Alliance was undoubtedly acquiring a certain military value, even if the process was slow. Russia was again on the upgrade and after the convention with England in 1907 the Tsardom had "returned to Europe" in earnest. Though the more far-sighted might well have wondered whether this boded well for the preservation of peace, the French could at least congratulate themselves on the "Triple Entente" which was foreshadowed.

By the same agreement with Russia, Great Britain had undoubtedly increased her points of contact with the complications of Europe. She was perforce more intimately concerned than hitherto with the problems of the Balkans. On the other hand these were years of comparative tranquillity so far as the more direct relations between France and Germany were concerned. The Moroccan question, if we except the Casablanca incident (November 1908), remained at rest, slumbering, if unsolved. And it was this question, which, not simply because of the Agreement of 1904, but because of the British naval interests which tended to be involved, had become the chief point of contact between Great Britain and the Franco-German quarrel.

In itself this fact no doubt helps to explain why the relations between the French and British military authorities during these years, though not broken, apparently became less intensive. The conversations of December 1905-January 1906 took place, after all, under the pressure of a critical situation which might well have erupted in war. The same circumstances were not to

recur until the summer of 1911. There was, in fact, leisure and opportunity to reconsider in a calmer atmosphere and if necessary remodel, arrangements which had been hastily improvised in 1906.

Moreover, though the possibility, indeed probability, of having to join France in war with Germany was in men's minds, it was no longer, as it had been for a few thrilling weeks the main pre-occupation of Campbell-Bannerman, Grey and the few ministers who had shared the secret of the conversations. In England these years after 1906, which stand out in retrospect as the "Eve of the Great War," seemed at the time to be the roseate dawn of Social Reform after the long night of imperialist adventures and Tory Government. Campbell-Bannerman, in particular, would not have chosen to go down in history as the man who helped to weld the *Entente*, but as the successor of Gladstone, faithful to an inherited trust in foreign as well as in domestic affairs. In him there was a man who assented to the military conversations in January 1906 with reluctance and a heavy heart. Until his resignation in April 1908, there thus emanated from the highest place in politics an influence which was not, to say the least, beneficent so far as promises of military support were concerned.

It is not, in fact, entirely fanciful to suppose that though, being a man of common sense, he realised that Britain might well find herself involved in a Franco-German war, he considered the particular arrangements made in January 1906 applied only to the particular crisis of that time; that the arrangement made then was not necessarily to be permanent either in its original

or any amended form. We have already noted in another connection his remarks to Clemenceau in April 1907 on the reluctance of the British public to contemplate armed intervention in Europe. Clemenceau, greatly alarmed, had asked Bertie¹ if the Prime Minister was ignorant of the military conversations of the previous year. This led to a message of reassurance from Grey which Campbell-Bannerman saw and approved before its dispatch. In it, however, the emphasis is laid on the conversations having been sanctioned in order to make prompt co-operation possible "if a crisis arose in connection with the Algeciras Conference."² The conversations did of course continue after this crisis had passed in peace. It is difficult to believe that the Prime Minister, as Chairman of the Committee of Imperial Defence, was ignorant of the activities of the War Office. But it is not impossible. According to Sydenham the conversations never came up officially in this Committee during the time when he (Sydenham) was Secretary,³ and Sydenham gave up this appointment in September 1907, only a short time, that is, before Campbell-Bannerman had the serious heart-attack which gravely impaired his effectiveness as head of the Government and presaged his death some seven months later.

If we cannot be sure that Campbell-Bannerman opposed or was ignorant of the progress of the Anglo-French military conversations, we do know that the

¹ British Ambassador in Paris.

² For the whole episode, *B.D.*, VI, Nos. 9-14. The dispatch approved by Campbell-Bannerman is No. 10.

³ *B.D.*, III, No. 221 (a).

British army was in process of reorganisation during these years. The object of this was the greater efficiency which was eventually achieved, in particular the ability to send possibly six Divisions promptly abroad. But though this process was rapid, it was necessarily the case that for a few years there was a period of uncertainty incident to transition. The transformation of the British army not only called for amendment of the plans arranged in 1906, but made it certain that no plan could be regarded as final until the process of transformation was complete. And such evidence as exists concerning the military conversations during these years is in part concerned with amendments made necessary by the contemporary changes in the British army.

Other factors must also, no doubt, be taken into consideration. Much obviously depended on the character and views of the British Director of Military Operations. Grierson, so far as one can judge, was convinced of the probability if not inevitability of war with Germany. For him negotiations with the likely ally were no doubt congenial; although he had, as we have seen, strong views on the character of Anglo-French military co-operation, views which certainly did not envisage the passage of the British Expeditionary Force out of British control. In October 1906, however, Grierson left the War Office and was succeeded, as Director of Military Operations, by Sir Spencer Ewart.

In his book Huguet is at no pains to hide his dissatisfaction with this officer. He had got on well with Grierson, he was to get on even better with Wilson, and, in retrospect, the Ewart period must have stood out in

painful contrast. In the whole course of his four years' tenure of the office, he reports, Ewart never saw him personally "about the work which should have been carried out in common." Huguet had to continue with subordinates, admittedly keen enough, the work begun with Grierson in person, and he condemns Ewart as an officer of a timorous nature with no liking for responsibility. He seems to imply that, unlike others, he did not view with the same anxiety "the supreme menace with which German ambition threatened Europe." He complains also, that, at this time, though the British were willing enough to decide in theory the aims and methods of their intervention, the French had the impression that the studies remained only on paper and that nothing had been done to put them into execution. Vague replies were given to definite questions and nothing better could be hoped in view of the manifest desire of the British authorities to limit the work to theory "without passing to practical measures which might have compromised the future."¹

In spite of Huguet's strictures it may not improbably have been a strong sense of responsibility which explains Ewart's caution. It is impossible to judge. It would be interesting to know if he was acting under explicit orders and, if so, of whom. He may well, again, have had strong views of his own on the question of consultation with the French. Nevertheless, the conversations did continue, if through subordinates, and if the spirit in which they were conducted by the British was somewhat changed.

¹ Huguet, pp. 7, 10.

It remains to investigate their character and purpose. But first we may notice some of the activities of Grierson during his last months as Director of Military Operations. In the late summer of 1906 he apparently visited both the Belgian and French manœuvres, and at the latter met both Ducarne and Brun, the French Chief of Staff. Ducarne reported him as saying that the reorganisation of the British army would mean, not only that 150,000 men could be sent abroad, but that they would be available in the field in a shorter time than had been decided earlier.¹ Ducarne, on the same occasion, confided to Brun that at the request of the British Government, he had just been studying the means of transporting by rail 100,000 British troops, who would disembark at either Belgian or French ports, and would concentrate to the north of the Sambre between Mons and Charleroi.²

Grierson thus did his best, as always, to hearten the Belgians, by pointing out the increased numbers which Britain could send to their support and also (for this always worried Ducarne) by stressing the rapidity with which they might be moved to their battle-stations. No doubt the Belgian authorities, like the French, were now wondering what effect the reorganisation of the British Army which had now begun would have on the promises of the sort made earlier in the year.³

Grierson's conversation at the same time with Brun has already been mentioned in part.⁴ He and French, who was also present, said that they did not doubt that

¹ Schwertfeger, p. 107.

² Paléologue, pp. 433 ff.

³ See below, p. 89.

⁴ Paléologue, pp. 433 ff., and see above, p. 53.

the Germans would open with a powerful offensive against Liège and Namur with the idea of reaching the valley of the Oise and marching direct on Paris. They had no doubt, either, that, in these circumstances, France could count on the most rapid and energetic support of Great Britain. The Expeditionary Force, however, would not include more than 100,000 men, at least at the outset. It would land, according to circumstances, either at Antwerp and Ostend or in French ports.

We may notice the emphasis laid again on the connection between British intervention and the violation of Belgian neutrality; the numbers of British troops said to be available and not least, the possibility of a landing being made at Belgian ports.

Brun, in reply, stressed the importance of the landing being made on the French coast between Havre and Dunkirk; and he went on, as we have seen, to discuss the possible points of junction between the British and French forces. Grierson had expressed a preference (in view of the importance of British troops fighting from the outset on Belgian soil) either for the line Mézières-Hirson, or, better, on the Sambre itself from Maubeuge to Charleroi, this latter being, in fact, mainly on Belgian soil. Thence an advance could be made on Namur and Dinant. It will be noticed that, as a Belgian "zone," it resembles that (Mons-Charleroi) which he is said to have discussed with Ducarne.

Brun stated that, according to the French plan of concentration, the English contingent would prolong the left wing of the French armies near Vouziers.

Except for the letter of Ducarne reporting the

increased numbers and increased rapidity of concentration of the British troops, we are dealing here with conversations retailed at second hand. They must, in consequence, be treated with reserve. It is, for instance, difficult to see how, at this time, the British could prolong at Vouziers the left of a French line which, it would seem, already included, or was designed soon to include, a fifth army assembled near Révigny.¹ It is by no means easy, in fact, to reconcile this conversation with the existence of the plan or plans which were made earlier in the year. Grierson may either have been seeking simply to obtain from the French as much information about their plans as possible; or, these conversations may have been intended as first steps, now that the immediate danger of war had passed, to revise the plan fixed earlier. Certainly, what both he and Ducarne said to Brun seems to show that the British were now interested in a concentration in the south-west region of Belgium. These may well have been "second thoughts" lest concentration so far forward as at Ciney-Namur-Dinant should lead to the British being overwhelmed in the first onset; an early sign, perhaps, of the process which was to move the British zone of concentration away from the vanguard of the German armies. Even so, to concentrate in this region was not only to approach nearer towards "alignment with the French," but perhaps also to lay less stress on the preservation of Antwerp as a sally-port, which is so much emphasised in the plans of January-April 1906.

Grierson, in any case, was shortly to leave the War

¹ See above, p. 63.

Office for Aldershot and his direct participation in the negotiations with France came, in consequence, to an end.

Ewart, his successor, we are told, found it necessary to revise the original scheme, partly because of changes in the organisation of the Home Army and partly because of "intimated changes in the French plan of mobilisation and concentration which affected the ports of disembarkation and railway transport therefrom." It is impossible to say what exactly these changes were. The French Plan XV of March 1903 (which, incidentally, had included precautions to be taken against England) underwent certain modifications in 1906 and 1907. The "Plan XV *bis*" which resulted made provision against a German movement threatening the French left in consequence of the violation of Belgian neutrality. If there were to be co-operation between the British and French armies it was likely to be affected by these changes.¹

It appears that the outlines of a plan at least had been decided on by the end of July 1907. On the 26th, Sir Nevile Lyttelton (Chief of the General Staff, 1904-8) submitted a covering memorandum to the Foreign Office indicating what action it was proposed to take. With a few verbal amendments it was approved by Grey and Huguot was informed accordingly. At the same time the Admiralty was unofficially informed of the changes in the scheme, so far as it was concerned, and Fisher authorised Ewart to settle the details with Ottley (Director of Naval Intelligence, 1905-7). This scheme

¹ *Les Armées Françaises*, I, 1, pp. 9-10.

was subjected to further elaboration and, on December 3rd, 1908, was laid before the sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence which had been appointed by the Prime Minister to consider the military needs of the Empire. At a third meeting of this sub-committee (March 23rd, 1909) the question of military assistance to the French was further discussed and the plan "to which preference is given by the General Staff" was approved; the General Staff being authorised to work out all the necessary details. On July 24th, 1909, the sub-committee reported to the Committee of Imperial Defence.

The above information is to be found in the Memorandum on Military Conversations with France drawn up by Lord Nicholson in November 1911.¹ He told the story, however, in bare outline and the few further particulars which are available must be sought elsewhere.

Thus, the official history of the French armies states that, in January 1908, definite principles were arrived at concerning military co-operation with the English.² If this was so (and it refers, presumably, to the plan submitted by Lyttelton to Grey in July 1907), the detailed arrangements had no doubt yet to be worked out. Huguet emphasises the importance in this connection of the year 1908. He reports great progress in this year; the transport-tablets were fixed for the British Army on the same plans as the French and by the end of the year "certain results were achieved."³

¹ *B.D.*, VII, No. 639.

² *Op. cit.*, I, 1, p. 48.

³ *Britain and the War*, p. 9.

Huguet also furnishes some information as to the size of the Expeditionary Force and its proposed destination. As "the most sanguine spirits," he says, could not at this time count, even in theory, on the dispatch of the whole Force, it was decided to send, of the six Infantry Divisions and the Cavalry Corps, four Infantry Divisions and two Cavalry Divisions, i.e. about 100,000 men. The studies were based on these figures.¹ They seem to be more likely than the 200,000 men referred to by Lord Esher in an entry in his *Journal* for October 2nd, 1908.

As to the destination of the troops, there was, Huguet points out, some controversy. The British General Staff, animated by the idea that the dispatch of an army to the Continent was bound up with the question of the defence of Belgium and that it was on Belgian soil that its full weight should be felt, wished to send the troops to Antwerp. The French, on the other hand, wanted the British not to be sent to what they regarded as a theatre of secondary importance, but to the main theatre, to France and to take up position alongside the French army, either to prolong its line or to guard its flank. The controversy was apparently prolonged and Huguet alleges that it was the attitude of the British Admiralty which finally decided it in his favour. The Admiralty, so he says, announced its intention of closing the Channel from the outbreak of hostilities in order to give maximum security to the lines of communication. Hence, disembarkation could only take place south of the line Dover-Cape Grisnez; Antwerp and the Belgian coast-

¹ *Britain and the War*, p. 8.

line were thus ruled out. Dunkirk and Calais, despite obvious advantages, could not be used either; so that Boulogne, Le Havre and Rouen (in spite of the inconvenience in the last case of the passage up the Seine) were chosen.¹

Huguet, unfortunately, does not specify the British zone of concentration, except in so far as he speaks, as above, of prolonging the French line or guarding its flank. For anything more specific we look for the most part in vain. There are, however, some scattered references by Lord Esher which have a bearing on this question. In the entry in his *Journal* (October 2nd, 1908), to which reference has already been made, he speaks of the King having in *Great Britain* a force of 200,000 men which could be ready in three weeks and possibly eighteen days to fight on the line of the Meuse.² The "line of the Meuse" is admittedly not a very precise phrase; nor does it necessarily follow that it was now intended to detrain the British troops actually on that line as had been proposed, for instance, in one of the Barnardiston-Ducarne plans. Esher's statement would apply to a variety of alternatives.

On November 8th, 1908, he had a long talk with Huguet which at least throws light on French wishes at this time. There can be little doubt that Huguet seized the opportunity of a meeting with one whose peculiar, if real power was fully appreciated, to state as vigorously as possible the French point of view. France, he said, had no hope of support from Russia;

¹ *Britain and the War*, p. 92.

² *Journals and Letters of Lord Esher*, II, p. 350.

the utmost anticipated was that she would mobilise her Polish forces and so possibly neutralise three or four German Army Corps. So far as the French themselves were concerned, in staff and armament they were equal, if not superior, to the enemy. In numbers, however, they fell short by about 200,000 men in the first line. Their fortresses were good, stretching in a line from Belfort to Epinal, then a gap, and from Toul to Verdun. They were manned in peace by men of the first line who, in war, would immediately be relieved by territorial reservists. The general plan was to hold the 300 miles of frontier lightly with reserves in rear ready to deliver a strong counter-attack. They calculated that the Germans must either advance through the gap or violate Belgium and Luxembourg. The French proposed to wait on the defensive. They wanted the British troops to be placed under the French generalissimo forming part of the French reserve. They scouted the idea, freely held in England, that a British force was wanted for the moral effect; it was rather needed as additional force at the decisive point.¹

Huguet thus outlined a plan which was quite in keeping with all we know as to French conceptions of the value in use of the British army. By minimising Russian assistance and dwelling on the consequent numerical inferiority of the French on the "western front," he implied the advisability if not necessity of putting the British troops where the French certainly wanted them. But his remarks rather alarmed Esher

¹ *Journals and Letters of Lord Esher*, II, pp. 357-8.

than convinced him, and he noted in his *Journal* that if these proposals were known in certain quarters (was he thinking of Fisher, or King Edward?) great difficulties would arise. To place the whole of the British army under French generals was a wholly new departure, quite without precedent, and alternative schemes would have to be prepared.¹

Lord Esher, we know, could never bring himself to approve "alignment with the French."² Far less was he likely to assign to His Majesty's Army the rôle of Reserves. Such proposals could scarcely commend themselves to a man whose view of the situation was not exclusively military. British policy could hardly be conceived of as a reserve force for the French and no plan of military co-operation could properly be built up on such a basis.

This conversation may have inspired him with a desire for further information. At all events, early in January 1909, he dined with French in order to meet Huguet once more. For four hours the aspects of a Franco-German war were discussed and the possible assistance to be given by England was fully examined. No details are given, though Esher appears to have derived from Huguet's remarks an impression of pessimism amongst the French. He ascribed it to the "defensive" attitude which they had thought it necessary to adopt, which was contrary to the genius of the French people. Though the French had a great army, he had serious doubts about the Higher Com-

¹ *Journals and Letters of Lord Esher*, II, p. 358.

² *Ibid.*, III (ed. Esher), p. 184.

mand.¹ These impressions can certainly have done nothing to remove his dislike of committing the British army to French control.

It is impossible to say how far Esher was acquainted with the conversations which were at this time proceeding between Huguet and the British Directorate of Military Operations. All one can say is that he had strong views on the subject of military intervention on the Continent which no doubt found expression in the high places in which he habitually moved. That serious controversy on the subject persisted in England is, as we shall see, made clear enough on other grounds.

So far, then, as the intended British zone of concentration during these years is concerned, it is quite impossible to speak with precision. The British apparently still hankered after a landing at Belgian ports and for action on Belgian soil. The relation between Belgium and British intervention was, as we know, never to lose its force. Nor does agreement to land the Expeditionary Force at French ports necessarily imply that it was to detrain eventually in a French station; or if in a French station, one in alignment or reserve to the French armies. Again, it might, as Grierson suggested, in September 1906, detrain in France at a point conveniently placed for an immediate march into Belgium. Such indications as there are during this period point either to the classic ground in the south-western corner of Belgium or to the French frontier districts which adjoined.

There are, it is true, no indications that any Anglo-

¹ *Journals and Letters of Lord Esher*, I, pp. 365-6.

Belgian conversations occurred during Ewart's period as Director of Military Operations. On the contrary there is good reason to believe that they did not. It seems, in fact, as though the scheme carefully worked out by Barnardiston and Ducarne in the early months of 1906 became a dead letter as soon as it was apparent that it was not going to be put into force. Thus, in January 1909, at the request of the Belgian War Minister, Ducarne drew up memoranda on the existing situation. Speaking of England he stated that it was impossible to say what action she could or would now take in the event of war. The Belgians had been quite clear on this point in June 1906. They were so no longer; *parce'que nos relations de ce moment n'ont pas continué*. At the time of the Algeciras Conference the British had promised to attempt to reduce the time in which the British forces would be available in Belgium; but they could not lose sight of the fact that the British army was now in full process of reorganisation.¹

Thus, if the British talked still of a Belgian expedition, there is no evidence of joint preparation to this end by the responsible British and Belgian authorities. Indeed, it is not until after Wilson had become Director (August 1910) that there are once more signs of such contact in the Jungbluth-Bridges conversations.²

In short, the weight (though it is not very ponderous) of such evidence as exists points to a shifting of the intended British zone of concentration farther to the west. It has not lost, however, a comparatively close

¹ Schwertfeger, pp. 51 ff.; cf. Hosse, p. 50.

² See below, pp. 130-2.

contact with the Belgian Meuse; this still remains a desirable scene of British action.

There is, it is true, one positive statement which scarcely bears out this conclusion. In a letter dated August 25th, 1909, Lord Esher spoke of Laon as the place where, if he ever fought the Germans, General French would, he (Esher) presumed, assemble his troops.¹ Exactly what importance can be attached to this statement remains too doubtful for its implications to be discussed with much profit. It resembles that "alignment with the French" which Esher so much disliked rather than a more or less independent British Expedition with immediate Belgian objectives. Laon may possibly have been mentioned by Huguet in his conversations with Esher about the end of 1908.

It is, in any case, apparent that during these years Fisher at the Admiralty still maintained and on occasion did not hesitate to express his own strong views on contingent British war-strategy. He still remained faithful to his plan of holding back the British Expeditionary Force until the psychological moment and then throwing all or part ashore at some point chosen so as to take the enemy at a disadvantage. This did not, it seems, prevent the Admiralty from formally collaborating in the conversations with Huguet,² but it may well have inspired the responsible authorities in Britain, if not those in France, with grave doubts as to what exactly would happen if the contemplated emergency arose.

Fisher did not, of course, stand alone; his ideas appear

¹ *Journals and Letters of Lord Esher*, I, p. 401.

² See above, p. 82.

to have been at least sympathetically regarded by Lord Esher as is borne out, for instance, by a letter which the First Lord addressed to him in March 1909. He said that he had just been studying a paper drawn up by Esher and the comments thereon by French and the General Staff. He dismissed French's remarks as being those of a "pure, correct cavalry expert, and not dealing with the big question." As for the General Staff, their criticism was "the thin end of the insidious wedge of our taking part in Continental War as apart absolutely from coastal military expeditions in pure concert with the Navy." "Expeditions involving hell to the enemy, because backed by an invincible navy (the citadel of the military force)." He had that very morning been studying one "of inestimable value only involving 5,000 men and some guns and horses, about 500—a mere fleabite!—but a collection of these fleabites would make Wilhelm scratch himself with fury!"

But the main point of his letter was to emphasise the absurdity of wasting time on "these abstruse disquisitions on the Grebbe line or the passage of the Dutch German Frontier River and whether the bloody fight is to be at Rheims or Amiens" until the Cabinet had decided the great question raised in Esher's paper. "Are we or are we not going to send a British army to fight on the Continent as quite distinct and apart from Coastal raids and Seizures of Islands, etc., which the navy dominate?"¹

Fisher did not, of course, express his views simply in private correspondence. In Admiral Bacon's book we are told of one remarkable occasion on which he

¹ *Journals and Letters of Lord Esher*, I, pp. 375-6.

expressed them with vigour in the inner councils of the Empire. The incident seems to have occurred some time during this same year 1909. On November 18th, 1909, Fisher sent to a friend an account of a certain meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence.¹ During the Moroccan crisis the French had been "within an inch" of war with Germany² and insisted that 120,000 British troops be sent to the French frontier. The Cabinet agreed and at a meeting of the Committee the military plans were expounded by Nicholson. Fisher was present and was asked if the navy could guarantee transport. He replied in the affirmative. Asquith then asked him if he had anything to say and in view of the tirade which followed must have immediately regretted doing so. Fisher told the Committee that if 120,000 English were sent to the Continent; the Germans, putting everything else aside, would make any sacrifice to surround and destroy them and they would succeed. Continental armies being what they were, Fisher insisted that the British should be restricted to operations consisting of sudden descents on the coast, the recovery of Heligoland and the "garrisoning" of Antwerp. He pointed out that there was a stretch of ten miles of hard sand on the Pomeranian coast, only ninety miles from Berlin, and

¹ Bacon, *Fisher*, II, pp. 182-3. For instances of his faith in these ideas in later years, see also *ibid.*, II, pp. 131-3, 142, 146, 147-8. On p. 146 the impression is given that King Edward VII favoured his and Esher's views on British war-strategy. They were rejected finally by the Committee of Imperial Defence in August 1911, i.e. after King Edward's death.

² The Casablanca incident?

if the British army seized and entrenched that strip a million Germans would be occupied. To send British troops to the front in a continental war would be an act of idiocy arising from "the distorted view of war" produced by Mr. Haldane's speeches and "childish arrangements for training terriers" after war broke out. He concluded his remarks with an impassioned diatribe against the War Office and all its ways, including conceit, waste of money and ignorance of war. The British army should, he claimed, be administered as an annex to the navy and the present follies be abandoned.

One can hardly blame Mr. Asquith for remarking at this point that he thought they had better adjourn. Adjournment did not, however, heal the serious breach between War Office and Admiralty which Fisher's remarks made only too clear. Bacon adds that for some months the Defence Committee never considered, nor did "the soldiers" propose, any plan for helping France by means of an Expeditionary Force to take part in the main inland fighting. Whether that is so or not, it seems obvious that such a situation was bound to create that lack of certainty of which Huguet complains and until the difficulty was resolved British war-strategy could not be definitely settled, for better or for worse, along the lines which the French preferred, or, indeed, along any lines whatever.

CHAPTER VI

SIR HENRY WILSON AND THE 1911 AGREEMENT

With the appointment of Sir Henry Wilson as Director of Military Operations in August 1910 the last phase of the pre-war military conversations with France begins. British war-strategy was now to be more clearly defined, the "Fisher" plans to recede into the background and "alignment with the French" to become, at last, a generally accepted principle. For these things Wilson must be assigned most of the immediate responsibility. Moreover, he alone of the three Directors who were concerned from time to time with these conversations saw his work subjected to the actual test of war. It so happened that his historic rôle was to take one of the most important decisions in the entire history of the British army.

If only for this reason it is impossible to overlook the personal qualities and characteristic opinions of this officer. They are, it so happens, well illustrated in his published *Diaries*, which also enable us to follow the course of his relations with the French and to obtain a good impression of the strategic principles which he took as his guide. This wealth of information helps to explain, no doubt, why Wilson has been subjected

to such devastating, indeed pitiless criticism, for few men of his eminence have been so fully revealed to posterity.¹ Such criticism is, of course, the privilege of those who come after and who enjoy, in consequence, a knowledge of subsequent events not vouchsafed to the victim himself at the time. Thus with such knowledge available, it is not difficult to show, for instance, that, before 1914, his view of the nature and duration of the coming war was fantastically inaccurate. But it is perhaps a more useful exercise to attempt to discover why he came to adopt such views, the more so as this goes a long way to explain why the military conversations in his time took the line which in fact they did take.

For this purpose it is essential to bear in mind three things, his personal characteristics, the preconceptions which he harboured when he started work as Director of Military Operations, and the influence of events during his period of office. Only so may a just estimate of his work be made.

Of his personal qualities the main emphasis may be laid on one, his absolute belief in the wisdom of his own policy. No reader of the *Diaries* can possibly doubt his whole-hearted devotion to the welfare of his country. But it is difficult to avoid, either, the impression that he had come to the conclusion that he alone properly appreciated the perils which encompassed it and knew the right way out. He was abnormally impatient of criticism and opposition and, to attain

¹ For a particularly devastating onslaught, see Sir A. Macphail, *Three Persons*, London, 1929. This is almost exclusively based on Wilson's published *Diaries*.

his objects, used all the weapons at his command, not merely the influence with which his high position inevitably endowed him, but a certain talent for intrigue which is more open to criticism. Moreover, he had a highly developed contempt for politicians, forgetting, perhaps, that, whatever their failings, they were at least responsible, in a way that he was not, to the movements of public opinion. It is hardly possible to claim that he was an entirely loyal servant of the Liberal Government of the day. In short, a man with fixed ideas and the utmost pertinacity now embarked on a task the delicacy of which was only exceeded by its importance.

These conversations with the French were always clearly defined as conditional and any conclusions reached as not binding upon the British Government. It was precisely in this that their delicacy consisted. Huguet himself bears witness, as we have seen, to the effect which the personal attitude of Sir Spencer Ewart had upon the conversations conducted in his time. Nor, surely, is it necessary to emphasise the difference which the personality and opinions of the officer charged with this work could make. An English Director who believed firmly in the necessity of co-operation with the French and who was sympathetically disposed towards all things French was likely to "converse" very differently from one who carried on the work in a cool and dispassionate fashion. Just as the conversations were conditional and non-committal, so were the French likely to judge of the probability of their results being put into force by the attitude of the British officer

concerned. Not, without doubt, exclusively (they had, after all, a diplomatic agent in London), but nevertheless in part.¹

Wilson was manifestly a strong francophil. He was early convinced of the probability of a Franco-German war and had no doubt that England should participate on the side of France.² In this he was by no means unique amongst British soldiers. It was natural, therefore, that he, again like others, should consider the aims and methods of possible collaboration with the French and, no less, make himself acquainted with the probable site of the war. But he did not simply regard France as a potential ally. His attitude was not, in this sense, entirely "correct." On the contrary, his devotion to France not only, in all probability, exceeded that of any of his colleagues, but perhaps also of many Frenchmen. It is hard indeed to deny that it verged on the fanatical. Late in 1911, on one of his many visits to the frontier districts, he found himself again on the field of Mars-la-Tour. He had always, it appears, been much impressed by the statue of "France" which had been erected there. On this occasion he laid at its feet a piece of map showing the intended areas of concentration in France of the British Expeditionary Force.³ This sacrificial gesture can scarcely be regarded as the normal reaction even of one devoted to the interests of the country commemorated.

¹ This seems to me an important, though difficult point, so far as assessing how much reliance was placed by the French Government, especially in Poincaré's time, upon "military" impressions as opposed to those of Paul Cambon.

² Callwell, I, p. 73.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Wilson, when he embarked on the conversations, was thus naturally pre-disposed to the French point of view. Probably no high British officer, realist or not, was in 1911 a true "neutral" as between France and Germany. But none can have offered quite such fertile soil for the germination of French ideas, strategic or otherwise. Huguet had every reason to feel satisfied with the new appointment.¹

Moreover, by 1910, Wilson's personality and views were already well known to the leading military authorities in France. Whilst Commandant of the Staff College (1907-10) he had made a point of establishing contact with Foch, then at the École Supérieure de Guerre. He visited it in December 1909. Foch, who at first regarded Wilson's self-invitation as a bore, very quickly established the most cordial relations with him.² On a later occasion (January 14th, 1910) not only did he explain the working and methods of the School, some of which Wilson hastened to copy at Camberley, but the two also examined the European situation. Foch spoke much of Russian unpreparedness and they discussed at length combined Anglo-French action in Belgium.³ Foch, indeed, at first so lukewarm, himself returned the visit in England the following June and Wilson (unless we are reading too much into a characteristic recklessness of speech) had already, apparently, adopted the French principle of a single command, for he intro-

¹ *Britain and the War*, p. 21. Wilson at his first interview with Huguet in his new appointment said, with reference to the military conversations: "Important question! But it is vital. There is no other."

² Callwell, I, pp. 77-8.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-9.

duced him on one occasion as future commander of the Allied armies in the "big war."¹ The contact which Wilson had so eagerly established was to become no less close and cordial as time passed.

In addition to this admiration for France and for French methods, Wilson also apparently entered on his new office with peculiar views of the value in war of British sea-power. It is true that the astonishing statement mentioned below belongs to the year 1913, but it expressed a general conception which he can hardly have arrived at suddenly in that year. He seems to have minimised the importance of the fact that his country possessed the mightiest navy afloat. (It is particularly ironical to recall in this connection that it was, fundamentally, the German threat to this sea-power which had led, by devious routes, to the diplomatic situation which now called for military conversations with France!) Yet Wilson had something like a blind-spot for the British fleet. He certainly had no very high estimate of its value in the coming contest, and in this respect also he shared the freely expressed convictions of French generals. In his *Diary* there is a report of a conversation which he had on this very point in February 1913 with Castelnau and Joffre. Repington, it seems, had recently written articles in *The Times* designed to prove that the Fleet was "worth 500,000 bayonets to the French at the decisive point." Castelnau and Joffre, however, would have none of this; they did not value it at one bayonet. Though Wilson was admittedly more generous, he only rated

¹ Callwell, I, pp. 79-80.

it as the equivalent of 500.¹ It would seem as though he conceived of the rôle of the fleet as essentially passive—to guarantee freedom from invasion and to keep open communications across the Channel, something like the very antithesis of the views of Fisher.

Bearing these things in mind we shall not be surprised when we read the terms of the Wilson-Dubail agreement of July 1911. It is probable, indeed, that this was precisely the type of agreement which Wilson would gladly have made the day after he became Director of Military Operations. Nevertheless, other factors, which no doubt influenced or confirmed his attitude, must be borne in mind, especially perhaps the relation of Belgium to this phase of the negotiations. So far as Belgium was concerned Wilson had probably not such a free hand as had been enjoyed, for example, by Grierson. Meanwhile, we may follow his first steps after taking office until March 1911, when an important decision was apparently reached.

During these months he maintained an intimate contact with the French. In London he was frequently in touch with Huguet. In October 1910 he crossed the Channel in order to attend the wedding of Foch's daughter (in itself a sign of the already intimate character of a relationship which was not yet a year old) and on the following day had an important conversation with Foch himself (October 13th). The latter, who had just returned from Russia, said that the Russian army, though improving, was doing so slowly. He did not believe that Russia would actively interfere if Germany

¹ Callwell, I, pp. 122-3. Foch also agreed with him on this point.

and France were to fight about Belgium, but certainly would if war broke out through the Balkans. Germany, he felt, would absorb Belgium peacefully and throw the onus of war upon France. Foch's view, in short, was that "in the coming war in Belgium" France should trust to England and not to Russia and that "all our plans must be worked out in minutest detail so that we may be quite clear of the action and line to take." He felt, for many reasons which he could not give, that the year 1912 would be "a dangerous one to live through."¹ When Foch was in England in December 1910 Wilson took him to Sir Arthur Nicolson for a long talk.² In February 1911 Wilson dined with Foch in Paris in order to meet Laffert de Ladibat, the French Chief of Staff; who also met him for half an hour's conversation on secret affairs on the following day.³ All this was a rapid and great change from the days of Ewart and illustrates the determination of the new Director to infuse fresh life into relations which had become comparatively languid of late.

Certainly Wilson was at no pains to hide his dissatisfaction with the situation with regard to the Expeditionary Force when he took over from his predecessor. There appeared to be no definite arrangements which would enable this force to take part in a war on the Continent, should it be called upon to do so. It was, no doubt, well trained and satisfactorily organised in peace-time. Its personnel could be raised in a few days from a peace-to a war-footing. But little had been done with regard

¹ For this visit to France, Callwell, I, p. 88.

² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³ Or March. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

to mobilisation plans in respect of horses and no railway time-table for the use of the troops on this side of the Channel had been attempted. Wilson found, in short, that he had still to make most of the arrangements which would enable these troops to take up position promptly in the probable fighting-line.¹ He was soon busy, therefore, with the horse-question and with that of rail-transport to the English ports of embarkation; but by the beginning of 1911 he was still profoundly dissatisfied by the general unpreparedness for an emergency which he considered sure to arise. He tabulated the main weaknesses as follows:

- I. Date of complete mobilisation unknown.
- II. No train arrangements to ports.
- III. No Staff arrangements at ports.
- IV. No naval arrangements.
- V. Emergency strengthening of fortresses by parts of 30 battalions.
- VI. Emergency scheme for Aldershot to send troops to East Coast.

The Minute in which these points were set out apparently impressed Haldane and the interest of Grey was also aroused, since he agreed that the War Office might approach the railway companies.²

At all events, by March 1911, one definite decision had been arrived at. In this month the French were informed that, in case of British intervention, six Divisions would at once be sent to the Continent.³ On March 21st Wilson noted in his *Diary* that the first meeting about accelerating mobilisation had been held and that it was

¹ Callwell, I, pp. 90-1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³ *Les Armées Françaises*, I, 1, p. 48.

settled that the whole of the infantry "of the 6 Divisions would embark on the 4th day, cavalry 7th day, artillery 9th day." ¹ But details had still, no doubt, to be worked out.

Wilson had thus been able to fix the anticipated strength of the British forces. No information, however, is vouchsafed as to where exactly these were to concentrate across the Channel. The probability is that this had still to be decided and was, in fact, soon decided as a result of a fresh Moroccan crisis.

For some time now, Morocco had been out of the headlines and the Franco-German agreement of February 1909, supposedly "final," had led to a widespread hope that at least this potential threat to the peace of Europe had been removed. It was not so, however. The French had a clear idea of what they wanted in Morocco and continued disorder in that country gave them occasion to use the free hand which, they believed, the agreement with Germany had conferred upon them. Early in 1911 a pretender was reported to be advancing on Fez. The French felt obliged also to march, not only to the relief of the Sultan, but of the few Europeans, mainly French, who were in the city. The German Foreign Minister, Kiderlen-Wächter, soon made it clear that the whole question, presumably settled in February 1909, would be reopened if the French occupied Fez or impaired the sovereignty of the Sultan. But the French for some time believed that this might be adjusted by the method of "compensation" and the "Congo" was mentioned.

¹ Callwell, I, p. 92.

Then came the thunderbolt, the dispatch to the port of Agadir of the German warship *Panther*. With this move the Moroccan question was indeed reopened and Europe was once more plunged into a state of uncertainty recalling if not surpassing the worst days of 1905-6.

Great Britain was, in fact, doubly involved. Agadir, though commercially of little value, might well become a German naval base in the Atlantic. Further, the *Entente* was again being "tested" as it had been five years earlier, and in much the same way. Grey felt sure that he could not allow Germany to use the threat of war to extract large colonial concessions from France. The *Entente*, strained to some extent already by the triumph of the opposing group in the Bosnian affair, would collapse and France might be tempted to cross over into the German camp, leaving England more or less isolated in face of Germany. Nevertheless, to stand by France at this juncture, if essential, was, without doubt, to run the risk of war. If the situation in December 1905 was such as to point to the necessity of military conversations with France, that of July 1911 was certainly no less favourable for a decisive step of the same nature.

It would appear, however, that the origins of the Wilson-Dubail agreement of July 1911 are to be sought, in part at least, some months earlier, and that the actual initiative lay on the French side.

On April 8th Foch had a most interesting conversation with Colonel Fairholme, the British military attaché in Paris. It is worth analysis as there is little reason

to doubt that it faithfully reflects the ideas for which Foch was finding such a ready audience in Wilson. He began by emphasising the seriousness of Germany's policy. She was gradually drawing all the smaller states within her orbit and steadily building up her armaments. But it was not her policy, he felt, to bring on a war now; rather she would wait until England and Russia were engaged elsewhere and put the *Entente* into a position in which it would either have to suffer injury to vital interests or make war in unfavourable circumstances. War would probably come "à partir de 1912." In such circumstances it was the obvious duty of England and France to see that the smaller states were strengthened against Germany. Thus if Belgium, for instance, could be urged to undertake an energetic defence of her frontier with 120,000 men on the line of the Meuse instead of a useless concentration in Antwerp, the German advance would find itself gravely hampered. The same applied in the cases of Holland and Switzerland.

Foch laid most emphasis, however, on the necessity of an agreement between France and Britain as to the manner in which common action might be taken in case of a Franco-German war. This could not be done after the war began. The only valuable help would be to send as big an Expeditionary Force as possible which should fight side by side with the French in the decisive battles. Its presence would not only redress the numerical balance, which without it would be in favour of Germany, but would have a powerful moral effect. The clash was to be expected after the thirteenth day of

mobilisation principally on the front Namur-Epinal. If the British troops were to be present by that date they should be mobilised on the same day as the French and be promptly sent abroad. For this purpose it was essential to work out the plan of co-operation down to the smallest details of transport. But the French Government, when the time came, could not afford to earmark railway-lines and rolling-stock for the British unless it had received a previous assurance that it could count with certainty on their arrival. Foreseeing the problem of secrecy, Foch reminded Fairholme that the Japanese Alliance had been carried through without the prior knowledge of Parliament.¹

It is interesting to notice the circumstances in which this suggestion was made. It was exactly four days after Cambon had informed Nicolson that France might find it necessary to take military measures for the protection of Europeans in the Moroccan capital.² It is, of course, doubtful if their action in Morocco, risky and perhaps impolitic as it may have been, was expected by the French to lead to a war with Germany, still less was designed to provoke one. But if fears of a general war were not aroused until the arrival of the *Panther* at Agadir, the French no doubt appreciated before then the advisability of rallying to their side all possible support in view of any emergency. It is not without interest either to note that in August 1910 Wilson had been in Paris and had seized the opportunity to go thoroughly into Fairholme's work as military attaché. He was not

¹ For this statement by Foch, *B.D.*, VI, No. 460 (Encl.).

² *B.D.*, VII, No. 202.

satisfied with its nature. There was much, he noted in his *Diary*, that he would change here and, he supposed, in the other military attachés; they appeared to be dealing with details and with peace, not with war.¹ It is not out of the bounds of possibility that Wilson suggested to Foch the value in this connection of raising at some time such points as he in fact outlined to Fairholme on April 8th. Certainly in order to answer them the attaché would have to consider war if he would also have to consider relevant "details." In any case, if the French were now making overtures for a more definite military agreement, they could hardly have chosen a better man for the purpose than Foch, who knew Wilson well and, through Wilson, had already established certain contacts in the British Foreign Office.

The conversation with Fairholme was duly reported by Bertie to the Foreign Office. The leading officials expressed general agreement with Foch's diagnosis of the European situation. But the conclusion of something very like a secret military alliance was another matter. Nicolson thought it should go before the Cabinet Committee. Grey in a minute suggested that Bertie's dispatch should go first to the Prime Minister, Morley and Haldane and this apparently was the limit of its circulation.² Foch's initiative served perhaps to inaugurate a new phase in the Military Conversations. At all events we know that in this same month the British General Staff was busily engaged in negotiations with the object of implementing the decision recently arrived

¹ Callwell, I, p. 86.

² *B.D.*, VI, No. 460 (Encl.). Minutes on p. 620.

at to send all six Divisions of the Expeditionary Force as quickly as possible across the Channel.

Even so, the actual and elaborated plan including zones of concentration was not worked out until after the *Panther* had gone to Agadir. After this event Wilson was for some weeks in close touch with both Huguet and Sir Arthur Nicolson. On July 16th he notes that he "discussed every problem" with Nicolson¹ and, three days later, he left on a momentous visit to Paris.

He had arranged to leave in the early afternoon of the 19th with Huguet, but, owing to the fact that "Nick and Haldane had had a fright about something," he was obliged to delay his departure. In order to answer their many questions he, in the end, "laid out the forces of the Triple and Dual Alliances on the frontier for them." Eventually he arrived in Paris at 5.30 a.m. on the 20th, to be met by Huguet. With Huguet he had a long talk and then, at 3 p.m., proceeded to the War Office, where he met Dubail, Chief of Staff, Regnault, Sub-Chief of Staff, Hallouin, head of the third Bureau, and Crépy, head of the fourth. After working with these officers "in most satisfactory manner" until 5.30 p.m., he proceeded with Huguet and Dubail to call on the War Minister, Messimy. He found this celebrated minister both pleasant and cordial and another serious talk took place. On the following day he lunched with Messimy "at one of the cafés at the farther end of the Bois, in a private room." Dubail, Regnault, Hallouin and Huguet were also present and Wilson started for London again at 4 p.m.²

¹ Callwell, I, p. 96.

² On this visit, *ibid.*, I, p. 96.

THE 1911 AGREEMENT

It was a short visit, but in the course of it Wilson had taken a step of some consequence. On the afternoon of the 20th he had signed an agreement with Dubail. Messimy had every reason to show himself pleasant and cordial on that occasion. The French had now for the first time succeeded in making something like a military convention with Great Britain. True, it was hedged around with conditions and qualifications; it was expressly stated, indeed, that it did not in any way bind the British Government. But it could be put by the side of the older military conventions with Russia and the French could at least reflect that it was now a little more possible, to borrow Foch's phrase, to trust to England and not to Russia "in the coming war in Belgium."

The main provisions in the agreement¹ were as follows:

1. England was to use the whole of the troops available for active service abroad in the operations against Germany, i.e. 6 regular divisions, 1 cavalry division, 2 mounted brigades, army troops; in all about 150,000 men and 67,000 horses.
2. The troops were to land at Rouen, Le Havre and Boulogne; the infantry on the 4th and 5th days of British mobilisation, certain departments of commissariat on the 6th, mounted troops and trains on the 7th to the 12th day.
3. From these ports they were to proceed by rail along two independent lines; from Boulogne to Douai and from Le Havre and Rouen via Amiens to St. Quentin.

¹ B.D., VII, No. 640; *Memorandum of Meeting held on July 20th, 1911, between General Dubail and General Wilson.*

4. The British zone of concentration was fixed in the region between Arras, St. Quentin and Cambrai, and the British fighting troops were expected to be ready for action by the 13th day.

Other details are included in what, on the whole, is a remarkably short and businesslike document. But quite clearly much work still remained to be done before the scheme could be said to have reached perfection, and it was soon to be considerably amplified. It was, in fact, more a statement of what England hoped to be able to do and of the way in which she would prefer to do it, than one of what she could actually carry out at the time. Nevertheless the general principles of British intervention had been once more clearly defined as they had been for a short time, but in a very different fashion, at the beginning of 1906.

Not only had much detailed work in connection with this agreement still to be done, but a state of affairs in England was soon revealed which threatened the very agreement itself. It was the old clash between the "War Office" and "Admiralty" points of view. This still persisted. We have already noticed how, in 1909, Fisher, with an obstinate vigour quite the equal of Wilson's, had roundly condemned plans of alignment with the French.¹ This controversy, which threatened nothing less than the paralysis of British action in the event of war, had still to be settled two years later at a moment when war was confidently expected to break out. So long as it continued any agreement such as that recently made was so much waste-paper.

¹ See above, p. 92.

Mr. Churchill has given a full and vivid account of a meeting on August 23rd, 1911, of the Committee of Imperial Defence.¹ It was very secretly summoned by the Prime Minister in order to consider the crisis which threatened war. It sat all day; in the morning the army expressed its opinion, in the afternoon the navy. There were present Asquith in the chair, Mr. Lloyd George, Haldane, Nicholson, Sir Henry Wilson, Sir Arthur Wilson, Mr. McKenna, Mr. Churchill, Grey and French.

It was Wilson's duty to state the case of the General Staff and he did so, in a speech lasting nearly two hours, with all the remarkable powers of exposition which he undoubtedly possessed. He outlined first the anticipated German plan. They would, he said, use nearly four-fifths of their strength against France. Their armies being drawn up on a line from the Swiss frontier to Aix-la-Chapelle, the right wing would then be swung through Belgium in order to turn the line of fortresses along the French eastern frontier. Some doubt, however, was expressed on the all-important question whether the Germans, having seized the fortified bridge-heads or passages on the Meuse at Liège, Huy and Namur, would remain on the eastern bank of the river, using it as protection for their right flank, or whether they would have the available troops to advance beyond the Meuse and so extend the radius of the turning-movement. It was not anticipated at this time that, if

¹ *The World Crisis, 1911-1914*, pp. 55-9. For those present, according to Wilson, Callwell, I, p. 99. See also Haldane, *Autobiography*, pp. 226-7.

they did, their forces across the river would exceed the strength of two Army Corps.

What would Belgium do? Assuming that she decided to resist the invader, nothing, it seemed, could save Liège. French troops, however, might reach Namur in time to aid in the defence and the main Belgian mass take up position inside the defensive system of Antwerp. So far as Holland was concerned, it was thought likely that, if the Germans decided to march in any force north of the Meuse, they would cross the Maastricht appendix.

The British had not been fully informed of the French plans. But it appeared that they intended to dislocate the German enveloping movement by a vast counter-offensive. (This no doubt was to be of the type envisaged in Plan XVII now in process of creation.)

How, in these circumstances, was the British Expeditionary Force to be used? Wilson argued that if six Divisions were sent to take up position on the extreme left of the French immediately war began, the chances of repulsing the great German offensive would be favourable. In addition, their early presence would improve considerably the French *morale*; they would feel that they were not fighting alone. Wilson rated very low the value of Russian action in the early stages.

After much discussion and many questions, especially on the part of Mr. Churchill and Mr. Lloyd George, the meeting adjourned to meet the Admiralty representatives at 3 p.m. Another Wilson, this time Sir Arthur, now expounded contingent British war-strategy. Although the war-plans of the Admiralty were not fully revealed, it appeared that they embodied a close

blockade of the enemy's ports. But it was at least clear that a profound difference existed between the Admiralty and War Office points of view. The former considered that Britain's efforts should be confined to the sea. The army should not be sent to the Continent, there to be swallowed up in the conflict of immense masses, but be kept in ships ready for use in counter-strokes on the German coast. By so doing, it might draw off more than its own numbers from the German fighting-line. It was the "Fisher" plan once more. But the army chiefs dissented vigorously, as did a majority, in fact, of all present.

If the old divergence of view still persisted, it was now at last to be brought to an end. Immediately after the meeting, Haldane informed Asquith that he must resign unless important changes were made at the Admiralty; a Board of Admiralty must be created which would work in full harmony with the War Office plans and begin the organisation of a proper Naval War Staff.¹ Asquith, who perhaps felt stronger now that Fisher had departed, and who in any case had to bear in mind that war might break out at any moment (as he had not had to do in 1909, for instance), agreed and Mr. Churchill was soon afterwards appointed to the Admiralty with these changes in view.

Wilson had without doubt won an important victory. If, as we are told, the majority of those present at the meeting had disapproved the Admiralty's proposals, they had, by implication, accepted those of the General Staff. No doubt the majority of the civilians present

¹ Haldane, *Autobiography*, pp. 227-8. Churchill, 67-8.

were not exactly clear as to what Wilson intended. Only Haldane and Mr. Churchill, perhaps, had really considered the military aspects of the continental problem at all.¹ This fact may illumine the otherwise obscure question why the decision went so definitely in favour of the General Staff. Wilson, if he despised politicians, had personal qualities which made him a better advocate before such an audience than the rather taciturn First Sea Lord. He was probably both more voluble and more lucid, and since he apparently entered into more details than Sir Arthur, the picture he drew would be more readily grasped. For a highly complicated problem (we may note incidentally how Wilson minimised the importance of the Russian army, great as it was to prove in the critical days of 1914) he provided a clearly cut and simple solution. It may well have been adopted for these rather than for any more profound reasons. Wilson certainly made a deep impression on both Haldane and Mr. Churchill, who well understood and appreciated the art of stating a case.

Even so, we may notice (though the importance of this was to diminish with the progressive increase of Wilson's influence) that to reject the Admiralty scheme "was not, strictly speaking, to adopt "alignment with the French." Grierson in 1906 had condemned the Fisher-Clarke conceptions, but he had worked out a plan of intervention which provided for the independence of the British Expeditionary Force from both French alignment and French control. This idea was not, it seems, dead yet,

¹ See Mr. Churchill's Memorandum, dated August 13th, 1911, in *World Crisis*, pp. 60-4.

and there are traces of it between 1911 and 1914 in association with the name of Sir John French.¹ But it was an idea for which Wilson had no enthusiasm and he must have left the meeting of August 23rd vastly encouraged to pursue his characteristic strategic aims.

One other interesting point emerges from the events of August 23rd. There is a brief reference to this meeting in the Memorandum by Lord Nicholson to which reference has already been made.² After dealing with the recurrence of tension between France and Germany in April 1911, he notes that, as a result, the possibility of sending abroad six Divisions came under consideration. Revised tables for this larger force with accelerated dates of mobilisation were worked out and the necessary revision of other existing transport-arrangements made. The enlarged scheme was not designed to supersede the original scheme, but was an alternative; the arrangements made for the dispatch of the larger force would automatically provide for the dispatch of the smaller. The General Staff, however, recognised the propriety of submitting the new alternative to the Committee of Imperial Defence and this was done on August 23rd, 1911. Lord Nicholson makes no reference to the discussion of strategy which in fact now took place. He merely points out that "some of those present" expressed doubts as to the "prudence of adopting the alternative scheme, more particularly in connection with the requirements of home defence," but he adds that no decision was made.

Wilson says nothing whatever of this part of the pro-

¹ See below, p. 132.

² B.D., VII, No. 639.

ceedings in his own account of the meeting.¹ He himself, of course, regarded the prompt dispatch of all six Divisions as being of the essence of his plan. To his dismay, in August 1914, only four Divisions were in fact sent and for the reasons advanced in August 1911. It is very doubtful whether this made the difference which Wilson's apologists are inclined to suggest; but it must at least be borne in mind when his strategic principles are under review.

¹ Callwell, I, pp. 99-100.

CHAPTER VII

WILSON'S STRATEGY AND THE PROBLEM OF BELGIUM

I

Wilson had thus signed the agreement with Dubail and received what amounted to a vote of confidence at the Defence Committee before the summer of 1911 was past. In reality, however, his task was scarcely begun. He had still, so it proved, to perfect the agreement of July 1911 by putting Great Britain in a position to fulfil the conditional promises which he had then made. He had also to see that the general strategic principles which were enshrined in that agreement were not upset by criticism and attack. Judging by his published *Diaries* Wilson seems to have become even more active after August 1911 than he had been before. The chance of the Agadir crisis had naturally forced him into a prominence which he would not have enjoyed in quieter days. It is obvious, too, that by this time he had impressed both his friends and his critics (notably at the meeting of the Defence Committee) with his potentialities for good or evil. From now on he enjoyed and exploited contacts in the Cabinet, the Foreign Office and with leading members of the Opposition to an extent unparalleled by any of his predecessors in the same office. Although

the main evidence is admittedly that which he supplies himself, it seems likely that he now occupied and knew how to use a position of extraordinary influence. If it is trite to remark that England was now rapidly approaching a most critical moment in her history, it is often forgotten that Wilson was at the same time becoming one of the most important figures in both the councils and *coulisses*. Those who would seek to understand the making of British policy on the eve of the war can hardly afford to overlook, if they should not exclusively concentrate on, the dynamic personality of the Director of Military Operations. The tall figure flits incessantly across the scene, now with French or Haldane, with Nicolson or Crowe, with Balfour or Bonar Law, not least with Foch or Castelnau. From Whitehall to Moscow, on the lines of Chatakdja or the field of Mars-la-Tour, the "ugliest officer in the British Army"¹ moved with untiring zeal.

There is no doubt that the shock of the *Panther's* visit to Agadir forced Cabinet Ministers to consider as a lively and urgent problem the possibility of war with Germany. In this sense, no doubt, it had a greater influence than Algeciras. The seriousness of the situation appears especially to have impressed itself, for instance, on Mr. Churchill and Mr. Lloyd George, whose main interests as members of the Government had not lain hitherto in the direction of foreign affairs. Wilson, whose duty it was to be an expert on the military situation and whose contacts with the French were of course known, was much in demand for information and

¹ Callwell, I, p. 10.

advice. He seized every opportunity to state his characteristic views and not only on military matters; he touched on the country's policy in general. No doubt he was not exceeding his duty in doing so and it is interesting to observe what his ideas in this connection were.

They were remarkably simple and clear-cut. He started from the premise that war with Germany was inevitable in the near future. It followed that Britain must wage it on the most favourable terms. This, in Wilson's view, called, first, for the creation of an army comparable in size and efficiency to those of the great continental powers—in short conscription.¹ It meant also the creation of a Grand Alliance against Germany. On September 4th, 1911, he specified an offensive and defensive alliance of England, France, Belgium, Denmark, and Russia.² Here was the twofold recipe of success.

It would not perhaps be strictly relevant here to examine this programme of policy as such. It would not be difficult to show that no Government, certainly not a Liberal Government, could have contemplated conscription. The fact that some form of National Training for Defence was suggested in 1910 as one of the changes which the "National Government" then being canvassed might carry out,³ suggests that neither party felt strong enough to tackle it alone; and the feeling is understandable. So with the Grand Alliance. It

¹ See, for example, his remarks in Callwell, I, p. 93 on the "folly" of having "no army"; and cf. I, p. 120.

² *Ibid.*, I, p. 102.

³ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, I, pp. 32 ff. for this suggestion.

might be questioned whether any Government which decides that a war with any Power is *inevitable* does not in doing so allow one of its principal duties to go by default. The Asquith Government was in any case the last to contemplate a step which would in all probability have torn it from top to bottom.¹ The policy which Grey pursued was difficult and complicated indeed, but he could never afford to simplify it in the way which Wilson suggested.

Our main interest in these proposals lies, however, in the light which they throw on the spirit in which Wilson must have carried on the conversations with France. We notice once again the apparent lack of understanding of the importance of British sea-power. The greatest naval power, it seems, could only hope to count if it proceeded to train and equip a conscript army comparable to those of the Continent. The war postulated is predominantly a land war; the only factor to count, that of numbers.

Wilson was not to see conscription introduced into England until the war itself was two years old. Although a vigorous campaign (in which he was himself involved) was actually being carried on at this time both publicly and less publicly, Wilson may not himself have rated very highly its prospects of success. He cannot have been ignorant of the opinions of Haldane or of a section of opinion in the army itself. It does not, therefore, at first sight seem surprising that his plan was to send to the Continent as many British troops as were likely to

¹ The controversy over the military conversations (see below, p. 142) alone would suggest this.

be available under the voluntary system at the earliest possible moment. In this way the most would be done to redress the all-important numerical balance. Nor is it surprising either that, believing, as he did, that the decisive point would be found on the Franco-German battle line and in the first encounter he should in addition condemn the fleet and be willing to accept the common view that the power of Russia to create diversion would be small. If the war were, in fact, to be decided by the first throw in the West, it was natural to strengthen the French left arm and to throw in at once the élite of the British army. But if it were not, as others in fact suspected?¹ And what if the French were to miss their grip and be sent reeling? The fact that conscription in England was impossible, at least before war began, might well have led Wilson to re-examine all the bases of his policy. After war began the Government would no doubt with all speed raise and train additional forces. But this would take time and, as he had no very high opinion of the Territorial Army which existed,² he was, by his own standards, bound to imagine a long time. There was surely good reason here to be cautious before endangering too early the magnificent Expeditionary Force which the country possessed. Might it not, or at least its officers, commissioned and otherwise, be the necessary backbone for the vast New Army which Britain must surely raise after hostilities began?³

¹ For the views of Kitchener and Haig on the probable length of the war, see below, p. 177.

² See, for example, Callwell, I, p. 120.

³ As Haig pointed out in August 1914. See below, p. 179.

The only possible conclusion is that Wilson had not only no doubts of early success, but of success in a particular way. He must, in short, have had full confidence in the projected French plan which British action was to support and have believed that early British reinforcement would go far to ensure victory.

It is the more astonishing, therefore, to find that, when he signed the agreement with Dubail, he had not been fully informed of the French intentions. According to his own *Diary* he did not obtain this information from Huguet until September 9th, 1911, nearly two months after he had signed this Agreement.¹ It is true, of course, that, at this time, the famous French Plan XVII was in process of evolution; but that process was not completed by September 9th, and there must have existed some plan which the French intended to adopt if war had broken out in the previous July. No doubt also, since the promise of British assistance was always hedged round with conditions, the French may have felt reluctant for a time (but even so only a short time) to make even Wilson privy to their deepest secrets. But these considerations do not make it any less surprising that Wilson should have been willing to align the British forces with an army of whose plan of action he was not fully aware. As his speech at the Defence Committee on August 23rd shows, he had no doubt a good general idea of what the French would do. But it may be permitted to doubt if this was enough. In any case, he had not long to wait before receiving more detailed information.

It is probable that when he met Huguet on September

¹ Callwell, I, p. 103.

9th Wilson was informed of a change in the proposed British zone of concentration. We know at all events that, on September 6th, 1911, Joffre had informed the third and fourth Bureaus of the French General Staff that it was proposed to advance this zone farther to the east.¹ Its new station was no doubt that indicated in the Report of the French General Staff, dated March 1912, which was drawn up for the information of Poincaré probably in view of the Haldane mission to Germany and the consequent French inquiries in London.² This document is of considerable importance since it is a more detailed statement of the proposed plan for Franco-British military co-operation than the Wilson-Dubail agreement. Indeed, it is described as being more precise and complete as a result of frequent communications with the British War Office carried on through Huguet. The outstanding differences between the two statements may, accordingly, be briefly indicated.

In the later document the numbers of British troops are given more exactly instead of in round figures. It also states that the arrangements for the landing and short stay of these troops at the French ports were practically complete. The question of the command of the joint Anglo-French forces is also touched upon; the effective co-operation of the British army with the French armies of the north-east was to be assured by *directives* issued by the French Supreme Command in this theatre,

¹ *Les Armées Françaises*, I, 1 (*Annexes*), pp. 17-18.

"E. ARMÉE ANGLAISE.

Les débarquements seront prolongés sur Maubeuge et Hirson."

² *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., II, No. 272.

addressed to the Commander of the British forces. But the most important difference is that concerning the British zone of concentration. Whereas in July 1911 it was to be between Arras, St. Quentin and Cambrai, it is now advanced farther east into the region Busigny, Hirson, Maubeuge.

For this change the French were no doubt primarily responsible. During 1911 the idea of a strategic offensive carried the day in the French military councils and existing plans had to be modified accordingly. In August 1911 Castelnau was discussing with Jilinski the plan of an immediate offensive by the French army with the British on their left¹ and progressive changes were made which in the spring of 1913 resulted eventually in Plan XVII. The change in the proposed British zone of concentration was no doubt made in order to conform with these new and, in the event, hazardous conceptions. There was, however, no change of principle so far as British intervention was concerned. It was still ancillary to the French plan; the change, in the light of subsequent events, merely serves to illustrate the inevitable risks involved in the principle itself. In August 1914 Lord Kitchener was to express doubts whether the British were not concentrating too far forward, although his objections were in the main overruled.²

The differences between these arrangements of 1911 and Grierson's plan of 1906 are self-evident. If we bear in mind Foch's statement of French wishes

¹ Stieve, F. (ed.), *Der Diplomatische Schriftwechsel Isvolskis*, I, No. 117 (p. 139).

² Callwell, I, pp. 162-3.

in April 1911,¹ it is remarkable how many had been quickly realised, and the personal influence which the Director of Military Operations could exert in these matters is well illustrated. The Grierson plan for a controllable force operating independently in Belgium for primarily British objects has given place to one subordinated to French *directives* and strategy. There is no evidence that the French ever really approved the Grierson plan; all the evidence, in fact, points the other way. They accepted it *faute de mieux*, because at that time, thankful, no doubt, to receive anything, they were not in a position to criticise the gift-horse, still less to choose it. On the other hand the plan of 1912 gave them most of what they had always wanted. Only in one connection was it not in this sense entirely satisfactory; they had not received an explicit promise of supreme command of the joint forces. But they had received something like it and they could console themselves with the thought that, whatever might be laid down on paper before the hostilities began, the facts of the military situation after would probably give them in practice the supreme command.

II

In view of his known opinions it does not seem unreasonable to ascribe to Wilson the main responsibility for the remarkable change which took place between 1906 and 1911. But in assessing his responsibility, it is essential to bear in mind other factors over which he had not necessarily complete or indeed any control.

¹ See above, p. 105.

Already in Grierson's time we noticed a tendency to withdraw the British zone of concentration. If this does not necessarily point to intended alignment with the French, it does point perhaps to the influence of certain considerations which can have lost none of their force with the passage of time and which tended to reinforce the theories of Wilson. Thus the British experts may well have continued to wonder, as Grierson did early in 1906, whether, if Germany violated their neutrality, the Belgians really would resist as and where Ducarne always insisted that they would. It is possible that such doubts were soon leading the British to consider a zone of concentration from which it would be practicable to advance to the line of the Meuse instead of one on or beyond that line which demanded¹ a large measure of prompt Belgian co-operation. Indeed, leaving aside altogether the question of Belgian co-operation, there was always the danger of concentration too near to the advancing German hosts. The risk of the Expeditionary Force being overwhelmed in process of concentration may, of itself, have suggested the prudence of a withdrawal farther west. In addition, it seems that by 1912, if not earlier, the Belgian Government was beginning to doubt whether it was not jeopardising its neutrality by engaging in such conversations as those carried on by Ducarne in 1906. More may be said later on this last point, but it is worth while to emphasise that these considerations had, for the most part, made their influence felt long before Wilson came on the scene. They do not of course in themselves

¹ See above, p. 81.

explain why he made the plans he did make. These, without doubt, were the expression of his own deep-rooted convictions; but these other considerations no doubt made it easier for him to convert more doubtful colleagues to his own point of view.

Wilson was not, of course, blind to the importance of Belgium. Who could be? But he assessed its importance by French standards. He looked, as it were, from Paris to see Germans advancing through the Ardennes, not across the North Sea to see in Antwerp a possible base for operations against their flank and rear. Thus it could no longer, as in 1906, be a question of "stiffening" the Belgians, but of what action the Belgians might take which would contribute to French success in the initial and, he imagined, decisive clash.

When he was discussing the outlook with prominent British Ministers at the height of the Agadir crisis Wilson did not forget Belgium. He included it in his projected Grand Alliance.¹ "Value of Antwerp" and "Confining Germans south of Meuse" are two subjects with which he dealt in a letter which he drew up at Mr. Churchill's instance (August 29th) to be handed to Asquith and Mr. Lloyd George, a letter in which he wrote "freely on policy and strategy going hand in hand."² When he met Huguet on September 9th he impressed on him "the value of Belgian active support." He tells us that Huguet immediately informed Cambon who, bound for Paris on the following day, would lay the matter before the Ministers.³

¹ See above, p. 119.

² Callwell, I, p. 102.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

This question of Belgium was certainly discussed by British and French diplomatists early in 1912, though the actual occasion was the Haldane Mission to Germany. Neither the French Government nor its military authorities could have forgotten the warnings which had been received at the end of 1905 against the temptation on military or other grounds to violate Belgian neutrality. They would recall that at that time this was calculated, if not to make England an actual enemy, at least to forbid British intervention on their own behalf. Indeed, the importance of Belgian neutrality could not, as it did not, cease to influence the policy of Great Britain. But the attractions from a military point of view of a prompt French advance into Belgium in order to counter the German advance seemed so considerable that the idea could never be entirely forgotten in France. Joffre apparently was impressed by its advantages, as a partisan of the new "offensive" school was particularly disposed to be. At all events, on February 21st, 1912, he expounded before Poincaré, the Ministers of War and Marine and M. Paléologue (then Director at the Quai d'Orsay), the idea of anticipating a probable German advance through Belgium by a movement of French troops into Belgian territory. But if this was entirely in keeping with the new French offensive conceptions, M. Poincaré, at least, was not blind to the political disadvantages of the scheme, especially from the point of view of Great Britain. He pointed out at the time that it was the fear of a German invasion of Belgium which had led to the military conversations with Britain and it was necessary to be sure that a plan such as Joffre

had discussed would not deprive France of British support.¹

The French appear to have sought some light on the British attitude on these matters. They were prompted to do so the more, no doubt, by their anxieties about the recent Haldane Mission to Berlin and the Declaration of Neutrality which the British and German Governments had, in consequence, under consideration. Thus, on March 21st, 1912, Cambon spoke to Nicolson of the possibility of the French and British Governments having some day to consider whether France, being assured that German troops were about to enter Belgium, would have to wait until this happened before sending her own troops into Belgian territory.² On the 29th, this time to Grey, he expressed anxieties about a British guarantee of neutrality in case Germany were the "victim of aggression." England's hands, he argued, might, in consequence, be tied if Germany were not really the "victim of aggression"; if, for instance, at a moment of diplomatic tension between Germany and France, the former were to concentrate troops at Aix with the "obvious intention" of entering Belgium and France felt compelled to seize the initiative.³

If the French sought in this way for information, there is no evidence that they received any encouragement from Grey that Britain would approve such a "preventive advance" on their part. On the other hand, there is some

¹ *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., II, Note to No. 240 (pp. 244-5). Cf. Joffre on "Le Problème Belge en 1912," in *Revue des deux Mondes*, Aug. 15th, 1932.

² *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., II, No. 240. Nicolson replied: "C'est bien grave."

³ *B.D.*, VI, No. 559.

evidence that he made clear that she would not.¹ It is possible, however, that Wilson may have stated a personal opinion in this matter encouraging to the French. At all events, on April 4th, when speaking to Nicolson, de Fleuriau pointed out that the British General Staff would regard such an advance as necessary in certain circumstances. If misinformed, he was not corrected by Nicolson, who was in frequent contact with Wilson.² But the General Staff was not the British Government. No doubt France was alarmed at the possibility of a formula of neutrality being successfully achieved. Possibly also certain highly placed and influential English friends of France were equally, if less properly, disturbed.³ But it would be fantastic to suggest that these Anglo-German negotiations collapsed either solely or in part because the British Cabinet had to take into consideration a French war-plan!

Nevertheless these French inquiries no doubt served to emphasise the importance of the related questions of Belgian neutrality and Belgian resistance in face of a German invasion which had been raised at the time of the Agadir crisis. Some important steps were now taken in Brussels (April 1912).

By this time (since March 15th) Sir John French had become Chief of the Imperial General Staff in succession to Lord Nicholson. In his recent book Sir Tom Bridges has told how he was instructed by the new Chief personally to get into touch with Jungbluth, Chief of the Belgian

¹ See below, p. 138.

² *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., II, No. 300.

³ See the footnote to *B.D.*, VI, No. 559; or Poincaré, *Au Service de la France* (Paris, 1926), I, pp. 170-2.

General Staff, and "try out the ground."¹ In addition to his account of what followed there is some reference to this incident in the Belgian documents which were published by the Germans.² According to the latter Bridges told Jungbluth that England had available an Expeditionary Force of 160,000 men. If war had broken out during the recent crisis this would have been shipped direct to Belgium and that even if the Belgians had not called for assistance. Jungbluth pointed out that before this could be done Belgian consent was necessary; but Bridges insisted that the Belgians would not have been capable of opposing the march of the Germans and England would therefore, in any case, have shipped her troops to Belgium.

Bridges' own short account is rather different.³ He was instructed, he says, to obtain all possible information as to the feasibility and assistance available for British landings at Ostend, Zeebrugge and Antwerp in support of the Belgian army. Conversations took place which were "all duly qualified by the premise 'Germany has invaded Belgium. What shall we do?'" and the whole matter was kept confidential between the King, Jungbluth and the Foreign Minister. Bridges gives no further details except that he was asked on one occasion what would be Britain's attitude if Germany invaded Belgium and the latter did not appeal for help. He replied that he had no authority to say so, but that he felt sure that "the British Government would regard

¹ Bridges, *Alarms and Excursions*, London, 1938.

² Schwertfeger, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 62-3.

intervention under the terms of the Treaty as not only a duty but a right."

This episode is of considerable interest, but this does not mean that it must not be treated with due caution. It seems above all things obvious that Bridges was attempting to obtain as much information as possible about Belgian intentions in case of a German invasion and no less, about their attitude towards British assistance. Sir John French, for his part, cannot have been ignorant of the Wilson-Dubail agreement of 1911 which provided for the departure of the Expeditionary Force to France. The reference to landings at Belgian ports may thus have been incidentally designed to test the Belgian reaction to an alternative and purely Belgian plan. Indeed (though we move here on to very uncertain ground), it may be that the new C.I.G.S. was doubtful of the wisdom of the plan with which Wilson was associated. He had, we know, some sympathy with the "Fisher-Clarke" ideas of 1905.¹ At the Great War Council of August 5th, 1914, he was to speak in favour of sending the Expeditionary Force to Antwerp.² Belgium was thus not infrequently in his mind and it is not impossible that he was now seeking information from the Belgians in view of a change in the method of British intervention. This, however, is highly conjectural.

What must have been fully apparent from Bridges' reports was the somewhat discouraging attitude of the Belgians themselves. They were standing rather firmly

¹ See above, p. 72.

² Callwell, I, p. 158. Cf. Duff Cooper, *Haig*, I, p. 130.

on their neutrality. The British were reminded that an appeal for help was a necessary preliminary to a British response. Jungbluth's official attitude at least was quite different from that of his predecessor Ducarne. The British Foreign Office and General Staff alike may well have noted how the atmosphere in Brussels had changed since the early days of 1906.

This impression was probably not weakened by further investigations later in the same year. In October Bridges seems to have had an interview with Michel, the Belgian War Minister. Wilson drew up a minute based on his account of this conversation which was submitted to Seely and taken to Grey. No details are available but it bore on the question of a "friendly Belgium" which Wilson rated at "12 to 16 divisions."¹ Again, on December 30th, 1912, Nicolson, acting at the instance of the Committee of Imperial Defence and possibly as a result of Bridges' report, privately asked Sir Francis Villiers, British Minister in Brussels, for certain information as to the views of the Belgian Government. What would its probable attitude be if French or British forces were obliged to defend Belgian neutrality? If Britain and France, for instance, were compelled to advance through Belgium in order to repel German aggression in that region, would they be received by the Belgians as friends or enemies? Nicolson had told the military people who had laid the matter before him, that, in his opinion, the Belgians would probably regard them as unwelcome visitors and would be more likely to favour Germany. It was, Nicolson pointed out, a question of

¹ Callwell, I, p. 118.

great military importance since if Franco-British forces had to cross into Belgium to meet a German advance, their commanders would like to feel that "on their left flank" ¹ they had friends and not possible enemies.

Villiers replied on January 11th. He said that the Belgian Government held that, so far as the guarantee of Belgian neutrality was concerned, the position had materially changed since the British *Entente* with France. It was believed that England would now be involved in a European conflict and that, since Belgium would be in the theatre of war, her neutrality would not necessarily be taken into account and might be violated by British forces as well as by others. It followed that Belgium could no longer rely on the guarantee but must undertake defensive measures against three possible enemies, against Britain as well as against Germany and France.² Villiers admitted that he was not sure how far such feelings were really entertained, but he did mention a leaning towards Germany on the part of the Government. He concluded that circumstances would determine whether the British were received as friends or enemies should they put troops into Belgium to resist German aggression. But he believed that if the British took action before the Germans actually entered Belgium, or in any case without invitation from or agreement with the Belgian Government, they would be held to have violated the neutrality of the country and so to be

¹ This appears to suggest that the military authorities did not expect the Germans to move in force north of the Meuse since it implies an Anglo-French movement to the SE.

² Ducarne actually considered defensive measures against Britain in 1909. See Schwertfeger, p. 52, and cf. pp. 130 ff.

enemies. Though the feeling amongst the people and in the army might be different, the Government would treat the British troops as hostile, not, perhaps, by actively opposing them, but by refusing any assistance.¹

During 1912 the British authorities were thus paying considerable attention to the question of Belgium.² It is not surprising and, in order to account for it, it is not necessary to assume that Wilson's conception of a Grand Alliance had been adopted by the Foreign Office or that Britain was attempting to bully Belgium into an attitude of complaisance. No doubt the points raised by the French in connection with the projected Anglo-German Declaration of Neutrality called attention to the subject; but during and after the Agadir crisis it was likely to suggest itself without any French prompting whatever. That crisis had threatened war; if it had passed without it no one could imagine that it was the last crisis and that the spectre of war had been laid for ever. On the contrary, it seemed more important than before to consider all the problems of this war, military and diplomatic.

If we dismiss as too conjectural a possible desire on the part of Sir John French to initiate discussions with Belgium of a plan which would have placed the Expeditionary Force in that country, we may with more confidence suggest that what the British would now have liked were general conversations with the Belgian Staff. It is hardly necessary to point out the importance to

¹ For these letters, Nicolson, *Carrock*, pp. 398-400.

² Kluge (pp. 173 ff.) seems to me to read more into this preoccupation with Belgium than the facts warrant.

Britain, on military and other grounds, of knowing whether Belgium would resist a German invasion and, being determined to do so, was willing to make certain arrangements with her probable allies against this contingency. This had been done in 1906; it was no less important six years later, even though there might be no thought of revising the Wilson-Dubail agreement.

Nicolson's inquiry has not necessarily any sinister import. If the Belgians were to resist a German invasion Britain's path was made much clearer both diplomatically and otherwise. But if they were not, the question of British action simply became more complicated, not less important. There was nothing improper in Britain contemplating the defence of Belgian neutrality in case the Belgians themselves declined to do so. For a number of reasons there was probably good reason for speculation as to the attitude of the Belgian Government at this time on these important questions. A good answer to the question which Nicolson put to Villiers would, as it did, provide much useful information, which it would have been absurd not to attempt to obtain.

No less interesting is a visit which Wilson paid to Paris at the end of the previous November (26th).¹ With Grey's approval he crossed the Channel to discuss with Castelnau what action was to be taken if Belgium were hostile in a continental war. Castelnau explained his proposals and Wilson approved. To discuss this remarkable proposition was not, of course, to depart completely from the principle that British intervention

¹ Callwell, I, pp. 119-20. *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., V, No. 53.

was conditional upon a German violation of Belgian neutrality. That neutrality might, after all, be violated with the connivance of the Belgians themselves and it is not difficult to conceive of Great Britain intervening in such circumstances. Behind the question of Belgian neutrality and the sanctity of treaties lay the old question of British interests in the Narrow Seas. Great Britain could not have watched unmoved the transference of Antwerp and the Belgian coastline under the control of the nation which was now seriously threatening her sea-power. Even so, if Belgium had, indeed, failed to oppose the German advance and failed also to call on Britain to honour her treaty-obligations, Grey would have found it far more difficult to persuade his colleagues and the country to intervene than in fact he did. And to discuss the question which Wilson now discussed with Castelnau was to some extent to increase the possibilities of British intervention. This cannot have been lost on the French, in whose interest it certainly was to simplify as much as possible the conditions governing British intervention. One may doubt, also, whether this particular question would have been considered in 1906. At that time Belgian co-operation had been virtually assumed, though it must be borne in mind that there were better grounds for doing so then than in 1912.

The principal deduction to be made from this episode is that the likely attitude of Belgium was giving rise to considerable anxiety in London at this time. On other grounds we know that it was and, as we have seen, Nicolson was to seek for further information on this

point at the end of the same year. It seems, however, that when Wilson paid this visit to Castelnau he took the opportunity to emphasise once again the importance of France not being the first to violate Belgian neutrality.¹ This would indeed have complicated the question of British intervention. Nor is there any evidence that the French General Staff, though they contemplated it, ever actually elaborated a plan for a "preventive" offensive into Belgium.

These discussions concerning Belgium have been examined at some length in order to show how vitally they affected the military conversations. Wilson, who appears to have adopted "alignment with the French" from the outset, was in any case pinned down, as it were, to the left of the French line of deployment. Belgium to him was important in so far as its action was or was not likely to impede the initial German advance or aid the Allied counter-offensive. Whatever else may be said of the British inquiries in Brussels during 1912, it can certainly be said that they revealed an attitude on the part of the Belgian Government which appeared to rule out any further military conversations with that Power. Accordingly, if it was desirable that British intervention should be as prompt as possible after the outbreak of hostilities, it could only be arranged with the prior co-operation of the French, since only that was now available. In short, the factor which now governed the problem of British military intervention was: Should intervention be immediate? But this question really

¹ *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., V, No. 53 (note). That Wilson said this appears to rest only on the authority of Joffre.

raised another: How long will the war last and how will it be decided?

For these questions Wilson had a ready answer. It would be short, a matter of months, and would be decided in the immense clash on the Western Front.¹ If this idea of a short war were accepted (and it had a wide currency), and granted Belgian reluctance, Wilson's strategic ideas were enormously reinforced. His policy began to look like the only policy; if Britain is to intervene she must do so promptly and she can only do so in France. It may, then, be argued that the Belgian attitude as revealed in 1912 helped Wilson to convince colleagues on the General Staff who on abstract principles and in other circumstances would have been disposed to look askance at his policy. Thus the question of the attitude of Belgium which influenced Grey's policy so vitally in the critical days of 1914 was already working in a similarly decisive fashion some years earlier. Uncertainty as to this was one of the inevitable disadvantages under which British policy laboured. Wilson's Grand Alliance project, if Belgium had joined it, might well have removed them. Certainly nothing within the realms of possibility could have done.

¹ On this, below, p. 177.

CHAPTER VIII

WILSON'S CRITICS AND THE GREY-CAMBON LETTERS

The views which Sir Henry Wilson freely expressed on British policy can hardly have failed to become widely known in political circles and there were apparently those who had doubts whether his influence was entirely desirable. The Agadir crisis appears to have awakened in other Ministers besides Mr. Churchill and Mr. Lloyd George a realisation of the grave possibilities of the international situation. There was and had in fact always been a strong section of opinion in the Cabinet which did not regard a war with Germany, or, indeed, any war, with the same anticipatory gusto as Wilson. In the autumn of 1911 there were even signs that his place at the War Office was threatened.

At the end of October Wilson returned to London after the journey on which he paid his remarkable tribute to the statue of "France" on the field of Mars-la-Tour. He was soon aware of great excitement because Hardinge, Viceroy of India, had informed Lord Crewe of Wilson's scheme for bringing troops from India for use in Europe. Shortly afterwards an interview with Nicholson convinced him that the "peace-party" in the Cabinet were, as he puts it, "calling for his head." They thought he had

forced the pace during the recent crisis and were quoting his teaching at the Staff College as evidence of his "villainy." On the following day he met Haldane, as well as Nicholson, and obtained more information. Haldane said that there was no question of Wilson being asked to leave the War Office. He twice remarked, in fact, how "amazingly" well Wilson had done and how he had impressed the meeting on August 23rd. The fact was, Haldane continued, there was a serious difference in the Cabinet. On the one hand, he, Asquith, Grey, Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Churchill agreed with Wilson's lecture of August 23rd; on the other, Morley, Crewe, Harcourt, Mr. McKenna, and some others who were not present on that occasion and who were opposed to all idea of war, were especially angry with Wilson. Morley and others had quoted his teaching at the Staff College. It was feared that there would be a split; but Haldane said that he had told Asquith that if there was a change of policy he himself would go. In concluding the account of this meeting in his *Diary*, Wilson added that he thought "they" would stop his going to Paris, "but not much else."¹ It does not, in fact, appear that Wilson's activity was very much limited after November 1911 and he was to pay many more visits to Paris.

The whole matter was not, however, laid to rest. We may indeed assume that it was in part owing to this criticism of Wilson in the autumn of 1911 that the famous exchange of letters between Grey and Cambon defining the nature of the military conversations took place about a year later.²

¹ On this, see Callwell, I, pp. 106-7.

² See below, p. 145.

In his *War Memoirs*, Mr. Lloyd George has drawn attention to the comparatively slight amount of time which the Liberal Cabinets before the War devoted to foreign policy. And this, he suggests, was, in any case, a subject which was the carefully guarded preserve of a select few.¹ Certainly, the fact that military conversations had been carried on with France more or less continuously since Campbell-Bannerman formed his Government in December 1905 was not apparently known to any but a small inner circle of the Cabinet. The knowledge was apparently confined to Campbell-Bannerman, Grey, Ripon, Asquith, Haldane, and, possibly, Fitzmaurice.² The rest were, no doubt, inclined to resent being kept in the dark, and not unnaturally, as the most important problem in British foreign policy was concerned. After the alarms of Agadir they had good reason to wonder exactly how Great Britain stood with regard to France and it was at that time, apparently, that the fact of conversations having taken place became, for the first time, more generally known to members of the Government.

The question was actually raised in the Cabinet during the autumn of 1911.³ Indeed, we are told that there

¹ *War Memoirs*, I, pp. 46-7. Chap. I, Sect. 4 as a whole is most instructive. On the same point it is interesting to read Spender and Asquith, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 348-9.

² With regard to Fitzmaurice, see *B.D.*, VI, No. 13, Minute by "E. A. C." (p. 27). Fitzmaurice (see his own Minute (*loc. cit.*)) was obviously ignorant of them hitherto. Asquith, if he did not know of the conversations of 1905-6, "was aware of and sanctioned all the conversations that took place while he was P.M." (Spender and Asquith, I, p. 349).

³ Spender and Asquith, I, p. 349.

were now warmer debates on this subject than on almost any other since the Government was formed. But the critics, if they wanted to stop the conversations with France, did not receive very much satisfaction. Asquith, who was convinced that they were essential, could not do more than promise to keep the Cabinet carefully informed. It is not out of the bounds of possibility, however, that there would at least have been resignations from the Government on this question if Asquith had been unable, as Mr. Churchill writes, to point out that the conversations had begun in Campbell-Bannerman's time and with his assent.¹ As it was, the attention of the critics to this subject did not entirely relax.

On the contrary, they were given a further opportunity to raise the subject by the naval arrangement which was made with France in 1912, whereby Britain placed the greater part of her fleet in home waters and France did the same in the Mediterranean, thus denuding her Channel and Atlantic coasts. The grave consequences of these moves need not detain us. But a realisation of what no one could deny they might well mean no doubt encouraged the "peace-party" in the Cabinet to erect such safeguards as they still could against the assumption by France that Britain would automatically be her ally in a German war. Morley and Loreburn seem to have been especially alarmed by the addition of naval to the military conversations.² Asquith and Grey assured their colleagues that nothing in the nature of an agreement binding on the British Government had been made

¹ *World Crisis*, 1911-14, p. 34.

² Spender and Asquith, II, p. 71.

by the military or naval authorities. But a desire was expressed that this should definitely be put in writing. The form of words was actually drafted in the Cabinet and the well-known exchange of letters between Grey and Cambon resulted (November 1912).

When the French made the Naval Agreement, they had drawn attention to the dangers from their point of view of leaving, in effect, their northern coasts defenceless. They suggested, not unreasonably, that they could expect in consequence to receive certain assurances from Britain in the event of complications; and Cambon sought Grey's approval for an agreed formula in this respect. One such he drafted on September 19th.

In case one or other of the two Governments has reason to fear an act of aggression by a third Power, or complications threatening peace, they shall discuss the situation together and consider the steps to be taken in common in order to assure the preservation of peace and to remove all attempts at aggression.

There is no doubt that, as he said to Poincaré, Cambon was once more attempting to secure a written understanding with Britain on the subject of possible complications with Germany.¹ As ever, Grey was anxious to avoid anything of the sort, and on October 16th he told Cambon that Asquith considered an exchange of notes to be impossible unless the House of Commons was informed and that, in any case, after the frequent verbal declarations of the British Government it was unnecessary.² Cambon was not satisfied, however, and

¹ *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., III, No. 448, for this formula and Cambon's comments.

² *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., IV, No. 302.

eventually Grey informed him that Asquith would agree to an exchange of notes on two conditions: that they were not in the form of official diplomatic notes and that their wording was approved by the Cabinet.¹

This was eventually done in the exchange of letters between Grey and Cambon, November 22-3, 1912, referred to above. The text of Grey's was as follows:²

Grey to Cambon. 22 November 1912.

From time to time in recent years, the French and British naval and military experts have consulted together. It has always been understood that such consultation does not restrict the freedom of either Government to decide at any future time, whether or not to assist the other by armed force. We have agreed that consultation between experts is not, and ought not to be regarded as, an engagement that commits either Government to action in a contingency that has not arisen and may never arise. The disposition, for instance, of the French and British fleets respectively at the present moment is not based upon an engagement to co-operate in war.

You have, however, pointed out that, if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power, it might become essential to know whether it could in that event depend upon the armed assistance of the other.

I agree that, if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power or something that threatened the general peace, it should immediately discuss with the other, whether both Governments should act together to prevent aggression and to preserve peace, and if so, what measures they

¹ *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., IV, No. 301.

² Both letters annexed to *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., IV, No. 534; or Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, I, pp. 97-8.

would be prepared to take in common. *If these measures involved action, the two Governments would take into immediate consideration the plans of the General Staffs and would then decide what effect should be given to them.*

The portion italicised above may be noted. The French had suggested the following form of words: ¹

If one of the two Governments has serious grounds to anticipate either an immediate attack or some serious event calculated to threaten peace the said Governments shall immediately consult about common action.

If this common action is judged necessary, the strategic arrangements previously decided upon by the General Staffs of each Army and also of each Navy shall immediately become operative.

Grey, it will be noticed, succeeded in toning down a little the last paragraph of the French draft. Ostensibly this was on the ground that circumstances might call for some modifications in the plans previously made by the Staffs. At the same time, however, Grey's final draft deprived these arrangements of any automatic validity. It pushed actual decision a little farther into the future.

Some surprise was apparently caused in the Cabinet by the readiness with which Grey agreed to put on record the conditional and non-binding character of the conversations.² This suggests, perhaps, that the "peace-party" considered that they had made an important point. This exchange of letters was certainly important, but exactly how so is capable of a variety of interpretations. On November 25th, Poincaré officially informed the Ministers of War and Marine (Millerand and Delcassé)

¹ *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., IV, Note 2 to No. 534. My italics in each case.

² *Twenty-Five Years*, I, p. 96.

of the events which had just taken place and enclosed a copy of the Grey-Cambon letters. He remarked:

The importance of these documents will not escape your notice; the strategic studies which the General Staffs of the two countries have secretly conducted have henceforth the explicit approval of the British Government.¹

It is impossible to deny that this, in fact, was the case. The military conversations hitherto, or until recently, known only to a few members of the inner circle had now received the official benediction of the Cabinet as a whole. Those members of the Cabinet who had been uneasy about them no doubt congratulated themselves on having had it put on record that the conversations were not binding upon the British Government. They overlooked the larger and probably more important matter of approval by the whole Cabinet which was involved. The importance of this in the crisis of August 1914 was enormous. At that time there would, without doubt, have been something more than a minor schism if Grey had then had to reveal for the first time the fact that military conversations had taken place. It is true that the arrangements were heavily underlined as not binding on the British Government. The French could not allege that Great Britain had entered into a definite undertaking. But they could, nevertheless, argue that she had advanced a little nearer to it.

In addition, Wilson and everyone concerned in the military conversations could now work with a greater sense of freedom and security. In August 1911, for

¹ *D.D.F.*, 3rd Ser., IV, No. 563.

instance, it was no doubt possible for Morley, Loreburn and the rest to hold up Wilson as a schemer working to commit the Cabinet behind its back. After the Cabinet had unanimously approved Grey's statement to Cambon of November 22nd this was no longer so feasible.

By the end of 1912 Wilson had thus more than merely survived an attack which might have unseated him. In addition, just as the attitude of Belgium had been clearly revealed, so he could feel assured that any serious modification of his strategic plan was the more unlikely. He could with an easier mind devote himself to the vast amount of detailed work which must be completed before it could be claimed that the British were really in a position to perform what they had undertaken in July 1911.

CHAPTER IX

PREPARATION

No one can charge Wilson with indolence. He never spared himself in the work of his office, or in other things not strictly relevant thereto, and he seems to have infused other men and other departments with much of his own vigour and enthusiasm. The credit for the general preparedness of the Expeditionary Force in August 1914 cannot of course be ascribed to Wilson alone. Others, notably Cowans, the Quartermaster-General, must be given their due.¹ But we can at least wonder what the position would have been if another man with less energy and less decided views had been Director of Military Operations at this time.

His dissatisfaction with the "state of affairs in every respect" when he took up office has already been mentioned, as have his earliest attempts to bring about an improvement so far as the preparedness of the Expeditionary Force was concerned. The summary of the serious deficiencies in this respect which he noted at the beginning of 1911 has also been reproduced above. Wilson cannot, however, have made very much progress before the Agadir Crisis enabled him to define with exact-

¹ Much of the pre-war portion of Chapman-Huston and Rutter's *Life of Cowans* deals with his work in this connection.

PREPARATION

ness by the agreement with Dubail the object to be achieved. Thereafter he knew that Great Britain had to be prepared to put a force of six Divisions in a prescribed zone at a given time after the outbreak of war.

Moreover, this crisis, if it did nothing else, revealed a remarkable state of unpreparedness for the war which might have begun at any moment. It appeared, indeed, that it was only just possible to make the Cavalry Division, four Divisions and the Army Troops mobile. There was a grave shortage of officers, horses, guns, ammunition, mechanical transport and medical units, and the general picture of deficiency which Wilson drew in his *Diary* at the end of July 1911 is an alarming one. Even so, he was determined that all six Divisions should be sent abroad.¹

No doubt the seriousness of the international situation during the summer of 1911 helped him in his chosen work of preparation for war; it invested it with an urgency that nothing else could have done. In particular, the decision which was reached after the meeting of the Defence Committee on August 23rd to adopt the proposals of the General Staff and not those of the Admiralty meant that Wilson could now expect the collaboration of the naval authorities. So long as the old controversy had continued, serious preparation to send the Expeditionary Force abroad was in reality impossible. Although it still depended, nevertheless, on the goodwill of the Admiralty there was now at least only one plan officially envisaged.

Moreover the new First Lord, Mr. Winston Churchill,

¹ Callwell, I, pp. 97-8.

if he showed signs on occasion of a disposition to question propositions which Wilson considered self-evident, was equally imbued with the necessity of preparation for war. Above all he had gone to the Admiralty in part at least to ensure that, wherever necessary, it would work in harmony with the War Office. One of his tasks was to see that the navy was prepared to play its part in shipping the Expeditionary Force abroad if that necessity should ever arise. And so, if Wilson's efforts hitherto to reach an understanding on this question with the Admiralty had failed, he could now hope for better things.

A new beginning in this respect was made in 1912, though it seems that two years had yet to pass before the Admiralty tackled the problem in earnest. Thus on November 12th, 1912, at a meeting of the military members of the Army Council, Cowans reported that the Admiralty had said that they could not ship the troops "in time," presumably within the time-limit fixed in the agreement with France.¹ At the beginning of 1914, however, an Admiralty-Committee, which included a War Office representative, was set up and all details were now worked out. Ports of embarkation and disembarkation were decided on. Berthing at wharves was then tackled, plans of ports prepared and officers told off for the work of embarkation and of landing in France.² The whole scheme appears barely to have been completed before the outbreak of war, but it admirably withstood the test which so quickly came.

Other work of preparation was carried on steadily

¹ Callwell, I, p. 119.

² *Ibid.*, I, pp. 150-1.

during Wilson's whole period as Director of Military Operations, especially after Agadir. One of the most complicated problems was to draw up time-tables for the transport of troops both in England and in France. The work had necessarily to be kept secret and called for careful collaboration with the French. Every detail had to be carefully considered from the moment the troops left the depôt until they arrived at the railhead in France.¹ Nor were pains spared to arrive at the necessary pitch of exactness. In 1912, for example, an Artillery Brigade, a Regiment of Cavalry, a Howitzer Battery, an Ammunition Column and a Cavalry Field Ambulance were sent to Southampton, put on board ship and taken off again for test purposes.²

In addition the responsible officers made the acquaintance of the terrain and conditions in France by means of Staff-rides.³ One such as it happened was held at Amiens in July 1914 and on this occasion the railway movement, as planned, was given a thorough test. In view of its date and place it might well be called a "dress-rehearsal." The French railway staff-officers actually took up their war-stations as they had to do in earnest some three weeks later.⁴ Everything in short was done to make sure that the British troops would reach their zone of concentration in France in the time agreed upon.

Some of the most difficult problems arose out of the

¹ Callwell, I, pp. 149-51.

² Chapman-Huston and Rutter, I, p. 270.

³ *Ibid.*, I, p. 271, according to which there were staff-rides at regular intervals.

⁴ Huguet, p. 27.

actual date of British mobilisation. Though the process of placing the Expeditionary Force in France might, as it was, be speeded up, there still remained the question of the time when that process was to begin. What would be the "first day" of British mobilisation? It was likely to be later than the French; the British Government would have to be given time in which to decide whether it would intervene or not. In the event arrangements were carefully made on the basis of the date of French mobilisation with allowance ("n" days) for the number of days that the British were "late."¹

This uncertainty naturally made the work of preparation more complicated. Thus the French were obliged to reserve on each of the lines which were to be used by the British army, rolling-stock equal to the amount necessary for the heaviest day. They were forced, in other words, to leave immobile quantities of railway material which might otherwise have been used for their own purposes.² This, if no doubt inevitable, could not but increase the "moral" obligation on the part of Great Britain to intervene. If in a comparatively small way, it was, nevertheless, similar in kind to the naval arrangement of 1912 whereby the French transferred their big ships to the Mediterranean.

Huguet also states that the necessity to allow for the delay of British mobilisation affected the situation of the zone of concentration chosen for the British. This he says was placed in the triangle Maubeuge—Busigny—

¹ Huguet, p. 23; *Les Armées Françaises*, I, 1, 49, n. 1, for the dates of arrival as finally fixed.

² Huguet, p. 22.

Hirson, with the advanced alternative of Mons—Charleroi in the happy event of an offensive. It was placed in an area which, it seemed, would be outside the area of preliminary operations. The French felt sure that the Germans would violate Belgian neutrality, though not by such a wide sweep as was actually made. They therefore considered that the area chosen would both enable the British to concentrate in safety and then act against the flank of the enemy in concert with the Belgians, should the latter decide to defend their neutrality.¹

Thus, as the months passed the plan adopted was steadily perfected. This work called for frequent and intimate contact between the responsible authorities on both sides of the Channel. Wilson himself was in constant touch with high French military circles and some account of the personal relations between the high officers of both armies during these years is not perhaps out of place here. They cannot have failed entirely to induce habits of mind which were not without influence in wider spheres.

Something has been said of this rather imponderable matter already. After the summer of Agadir, all-important because of the Wilson-Dubail Agreement and the decision in its favour at the Committee of Imperial Defence, the "personal alliance" of the two armies grew no weaker. Wilson, certainly, exerted himself in this sense.

At the beginning of February 1912, on his way to Switzerland for his usual holiday, he stopped in Paris

¹ Huguet, pp. 23-4.

for talks with Millerand, Castelnau and Joffre, and later halted at Chaumont to meet Foch.¹ On his way back he visited the Maastricht "appendix" and then Stavelot and Malmédy in order to inspect the progress of the new railway across the Belgo-German frontier.² In the following September he was present at French army manoeuvres in Poitou, which were also attended by a Russian mission under the Grand Duke Nicholas, and on this occasion he was made a Commander of the Legion of Honour.³ Thence he proceeded via Berlin to Warsaw, where he called on the Governor, and to Moscow, where he met the Russian Chief of Staff, Jilinski. He returned via Kiev, Lemberg and Cracow to Vienna with the object no doubt of gaining acquaintance with a first-class Russian dépôt and the Austro-Russian "front." From Vienna he proceeded to Paris for a long talk with Castelnau and so home after an absence of six weeks.⁴ In November he was once again with Castelnau discussing, as we have seen, the remarkable hypothesis of a hostile Belgium. (He rounded off an active year by participation in a campaign which, by demonstrating to the nation the inefficiency of the Territorial Army, was to force on compulsory service.⁵)

Early in January 1913 he was in Paris talking with Castelnau, Joffre and Etienne, the new Minister of War. Later, he was at Bourges with Huguot and Foch.⁶ In the middle of June he visited Paris again,

¹ Callwell, I, p. 110.

² *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

³ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 116-117.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 117-118.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 120. He acted in association with Milner, Lord Lee and F. Oliver.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 122-3.

meeting Foch and Huguet and also having two hours with Castelnau.¹ Early in August he accompanied French and Grierson to the Châlons manœuvres. Thence he followed the itinerary Mézières—Trèves—Aix-la-Chapelle (examining the German strategic railways in the Eifel district)—the Ardennes—Namur.² After three weeks in England, he was back at the manœuvres of the XXth Corps, now under the command of Foch.³ Again he met Russian officers who were also present. Early in October he embarked on an extensive tour which took him to Constantinople and the recent battle-fields of Thrace and by Sofia and Belgrade, he reached Paris to discuss his impressions with Castelnau.⁴

In January 1914 Wilson as usual left for his holiday abroad, though there is no reference in his *Diary* on this occasion to any meetings in Paris or elsewhere.⁵ During the early months of this year he was much occupied by the question of the army and Home Rule. Early in April, however, he made a point of crossing to France in order to see Castelnau and explain to him exactly what had occurred at the Curragh.⁶ At the end of May he was present at a staff-tour directed by the same officer.⁷ His next visit to France appears to have been after the outbreak of hostilities.

Just as Wilson, especially, and other leading British soldiers visited France during these years, so also did

¹ Callwell, I, p. 126.

² *Ibid.*, I, p. 127.

³ *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 127-30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 146. He does not appear to have paid a visit for the same purpose to Berlin.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 147-8.

French officers visit Britain. Of these Foch was, no doubt, the most eminent, but there were others who under the ægis of Huguët found their way to the War Office and the Director of Military Operations.¹ There could be no doubt, indeed, of the strength of the *Entente Cordiale* between the two armies at this time. The French had, in fact, every reason to feel well-acquainted with the ideas of at least one not unimportant section of British opinion. More must be said on this point later, but it is perhaps well to point out that, though Wilson no doubt invested this *entente* with an especial cordiality and visited France more frequently than, strictly speaking, was necessary, the state of the European situation between 1911 and 1914 was such that, whatever the personal views of the Director of Military Operations at this time had been, he would have found himself obliged to maintain more frequent relations with the French than had been the case in the comparatively tranquil period of Sir Spencer Ewart. Certainly after Agadir, the French could not charge the British with a lack of interest or real purpose in the work of joint preparation.

¹ Callwell, I, p. 123.

CHAPTER X

THE WIDER ASPECTS—POLITICAL

Probably no part of the work of Sir Edward Grey has been more strongly criticised than the military conversations with France. They must necessarily be taken into consideration in any assessment of his work. But in judging Grey so much still depends, in spite of the almost embarrassing amount of information which is available, on matters of inference or deduction. If, for instance, we start from the assumption that Grey was a Machiavellian schemer bent on the construction of a Grand Alliance which, sooner or later, was to bring Germany to her knees, it is not very difficult to invest all the transactions to which he was a party with a sinister meaning. So the military conversations might be construed as creating in fact a secret Anglo-French alliance, concealed for years from the majority even of his own colleagues, what time its author was posing to the Germans as the most honest of brokers. But if this has the merit of making Grey's policy seem simple, it should be borne in mind that this was precisely what his policy could never be.

We may perhaps dispose at the outset of the myth which would interpret the military conversations as a conspiracy engineered in 1906 by Grey and the "Liberal

Imperialists" behind the back of a largely pacifist Cabinet. We know, indeed, and have done so ever since the publication of Mr. Spender's *Life of Campbell-Bannerman*, that the Prime Minister was fully aware of Grey's assent to the proposal for conversations which he gave on January 10th, 1906.¹ Lord Ripon, too, who no more than Campbell-Bannerman belonged to the Liberal Imperialist group, was also made privy to the whole transaction.² Both, however, signified their approval; Campbell-Bannerman, in fact, played the prominent part appropriate to the head of the Government in a matter of such moment. He made no effort to rally Radical opinion in the party or Cabinet against a Foreign Secretary who was anxious to take a step which he himself declined.

He may, of course, have been reluctant to make a stand at that precise moment and to revive in the midst of a general election the wearisome controversy between Imperialists and Radicals which had laid the Liberal Party prostrate in the recent past. He may have reflected that the crisis might, as it did, pass comparatively quickly and in peace. But it seems most likely that, though he realised the dangerous implications of the conversations, he realised (as Ripon must have done) that, unless the *Entente* were to be abandoned, Great Britain had no choice but to agree with Cambon's suggestion. It is indeed useless to complain that this Liberal Government pursued and even developed the Conservative

¹ On this whole transaction, see Spender, *Life of Campbell-Bannerman*, II, pp. 245 ff.

² Wolf, L., *Life of Lord Ripon*, II, pp. 292-3.

policy which it inherited unless a plausible alternative can be pointed out.

Even so, it is an astonishing fact that the Cabinet as a whole was not consulted in January 1906. The omission to do so has been described by a recent commentator as difficult to reconcile with the practice of constitutional government¹ and the judgment does not seem to be too severe. At the time Campbell-Bannerman evidently felt that it was necessary since he offered Grey a choice of three dates.² He cannot, in consequence, escape responsibility for none having been chosen. Had the Cabinet been consulted, the proposal might well have been resisted; for, when the Cabinet as a whole was informed of the conversations in 1911 and 1912, much had happened in the interval in Morocco and the North Sea. By that time it was, undoubtedly, easier to secure the approval of Radical ministers, as the examples of Mr. Churchill and Mr. Lloyd George freely testify.

To acquit Grey and Haldane of charges of "imperialist" conspiracy in 1906 is not, however, to dispose of the question of the relations of the military conversations to Grey's policy as a whole. To discuss the latter generally once again would be quite outside the proper limits of this book.³ Nevertheless some leading features must necessarily be borne in mind.

Grey, and rightly in a British minister, conceived

¹ Ensor, R. C. K., *England, 1870-1914*, p. 401.

² Spender, *op. cit.*, II, p. 253. Mr. Ensor (*loc. cit.*) suggests that fear of packages from the Cabinet was one reason why it was not consulted.

³ For a sympathetic discussion, see G. M. Trevelyan, *Grey of Fallodon*. For one less so, Lutz, H., *Lord Grey und der Weltkrieg*.

it to be his first duty to preserve peace. When he said that he "hated war" there is no reason to doubt that he was speaking the simple truth. Nor is there any reason to imagine that he had not grasped the elementary fact that peace, as it had now been for generations, was the major British interest. It is quite true that his was not a policy of peace at any price; like the majority of his contemporaries he could readily conceive of fighting in order to maintain British interests and security. But he, unlike some of his own professional assistants, did not, in his early years at least, devote his main efforts to manœuvring for position in view of a particular, inevitable war. Thus his handling of Britain's relations with France and Germany was not primarily designed to rivet on the latter the shackles of a "Triple Entente," but rather to produce a peaceful and reasonable settlement of conflicting claims.

Nevertheless from the very outset the possibility of this same war could never be absent from his thoughts. Otherwise how could he have agreed to add the military conversations to the promise of diplomatic support? It is difficult to deny that in fact the *Entente* with France had a twofold character from the first. It was a "goodwill settlement" no doubt; it removed, that is, the irritating frictions which had affected relations with France for years. But, none the less, the British Government had thought to do so at that particular time in order to lessen the burden of our isolation. When Grey agreed to the military conversations with France he was merely taking a step which was probable from the first and now had become inevitable if the

Entente were not to lose all meaning. So, in the last resort, "isolation" proved weightier than "goodwill."¹

Grey's rôle in 1906, therefore, was simply to put on record the wider meaning of the *Entente*. This is not to say that his rôle was unimportant. On the contrary if he did something which was implicit in Lansdowne's remarks to Cambon in May 1905, for example, the fact that he did so had considerable significance. It was, in the first place, a Liberal minister who now amplified a Conservative undertaking; a point which the French would not be slow to appreciate. Moreover, in doing so, he increased, as Campbell-Bannerman pointed out at the time, the moral obligation of Britain to go to the assistance of France in case of war. This has sometimes been dismissed as a matter of comparatively minor importance.² It has been suggested that Grey was, in any case, determined that Britain should intervene and that the constant insistence on the non-binding nature of the conversations was, in consequence, so much bluff. But the fact is, that this persistent provision was an essential feature of Grey's policy *vis-à-vis* the Franco-German quarrel.

When faced by Cambon in January 1906 he had a choice of alternatives. He could have, in effect, abandoned the *Entente*. On the other extreme, he could have transformed it into an Alliance. But the latter course was open to grave objections. Grey, after all,

¹ As Rosebery, in effect, prophesied in 1904. See Spender, J. A., *Life Journalism and Politics*, I, p. 190; Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, I, p. 1.

² Cf. Kluge, *op. cit.* pp. 177 ff. There is much of value in these pages, however.

was Foreign Minister of Great Britain. It was not necessarily in the interests of this country definitely to identify itself after this fashion with one of the two opposing camps of the Continent. If by the *Entente* itself she had, in foreign estimation at least, done so to a large extent already in 1904, she had nevertheless in fact left herself loopholes by which to escape if need be. Grey moreover was a member of a Liberal Cabinet. He could not overlook the fact that he must convince his colleagues and the country of the wisdom of his policy. It must remain doubtful if he could have carried either with him in a policy of alliance with France at any time before August 1914. Certainly until 1910 this Government was based on a Liberal majority in which pacifist elements were strong and in which suspicion of continental entanglements was little less so. Moreover, behind the latter conception was the basic fact, which overrode merely party differences, that England was only "half in" the Continent.

Grey was thus forced to fall back on a compromise between out-and-out alliance with France and the abandonment of the *Entente*. This was the policy of allowing military conversations to take place provided that they were always duly qualified by the stipulation that they did not in any way bind the British Government. It is this, no doubt, which tends to invest his policy with an air of double-dealing. Nor is it any less apparent that the compromise was, in many respects, unsatisfactory. It undoubtedly had, for instance, many of the disadvantages of out-and-out alliance without the benefits.

It is, however, difficult to claim that Grey, unless

he were to abandon the *Entente* altogether, had any other alternative, and the undoubted advantages of his policy as he saw them must, in justice, be borne in mind. He did not conceive of the connection with France as ruling out efforts to reach accommodation with Germany on tolerable terms. In his dealings with France he sought to make clear that his half-way house was not in fact alliance. He endeavoured to preserve a free hand in order to control both Powers; to make Germany, that is, fear that Britain would support France in case of war and France only hope so. This, indeed, was of the essence of his policy and it remains to be seen how his influence in this sense was affected by the military conversations.

That effect was by no means negligible. Germany, for her part, could not but suspect that they were taking place; indeed, if they were to be kept apprehensive about Britain's intentions with regard to France, it was desirable, no doubt, that they should.¹ But the Germans, in any case, had no access to the relevant official British documents; they could not appreciate the emphasis which was always laid on the non-binding conditional nature of the conversations. And if they had they might well have scouted the value of such limitations, though we know that, in fact, they made the French at times think hard. In this way the con-

¹ In this connection it is interesting to read Metternich to Bülow (Jan. 31st, 1907) in *G.P.*, XXI, 469, in which he reports Haldane as denying not only the existence of a Franco-British Military Convention but pleading ignorance of any non-committal conversations between English and French military authorities. See the marginal notes of the sceptical Kaiser.

versations cannot but have tended to vitiate the efforts of Grey to arrive at a genuine understanding with Germany.

We may note, too, the important bearing on Grey's idea of policy of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907. Britain's contacts with the quarrels of the European power-groups were considerably increased by that arrangement. When Russia "returned to Europe" (though for this the Japanese were as responsible as the Agreement of 1907) a safety-valve was closed. Between 1904 and 1907 Britain had been in the remarkable but useful position of having settled with France, but having at the same time an alliance with the principal enemy of France's principal friend. As she had not yet defined precisely her continental affiliations, so she had a little more freedom and so a little more influence upon France. The non-binding character of the military conversations was to this extent more real.

It is rather on the direct effects of the conversations in Paris, however, that most of the emphasis must be laid. If these conversations in spite of provisos and conditions led the French to believe that Great Britain would certainly intervene in a Franco-German war, then much of Grey's anxiety to control the French was so much wasted effort. It is unnecessary to dwell on the effect on French policy of certain knowledge that they could count in the last resort on the naval and military power of Great Britain.

When the conversations were inaugurated in 1905-6 France was in a very different position from that in

which she found herself in later years. Panic hardly seems too strong a word to describe the feelings with which a German war was regarded in Paris during the summer of 1905. The Muscovite ally was prostrate and France herself in no good case to fight. In such circumstances the possibility of British support was not so much an encouragement to aggressive action, as a form of insurance against otherwise inevitable defeat. But this was not the situation of France in 1911, still less in 1914. By that time, although it was still officially rated low by the French authorities, the Franco-Russian Alliance had certainly once more acquired some military value; how great it was the early weeks of the War would show. Morally also, France was enormously improved and her new-found confidence was symbolised in the disastrous offensive conceptions of Plan XVII. Without claiming that the military conversations encouraged France in the latter days to rush gladly into war, it is nevertheless clear that their conditional nature had less power of control in Paris then than it had in 1906. There is something in the criticism that Grey postulated the situation of January 1906 long after it had ceased to apply, until after the military and moral recovery of France, the Anglo-Russian agreement and the partial resurrection of the Tsardom.

It is worth while, accordingly, to attempt to trace the variations in France's relative certainty about British intervention after 1905. In 1905-6 the French were in no position to haggle about the terms of British support. After the Grierson-Huguet conversations they could take it as probable that Britain would intervene

against a German violation of Belgian neutrality. British troops in this event would be concentrated somewhere in Belgium. This help, if not of the type they would have preferred, would, nevertheless, have been of value. But if they read events aright they would observe two things—the importance of Belgian neutrality in connection with British intervention and the fact that if the British intervened they would do so primarily for a British object and only incidentally to help France. If there were signs during Grierson's last weeks at the War Office of a welcome tendency on the part of the British to attach less importance to Antwerp,¹ during the whole period October 1906 to August 1910 there were alarming indications that the British were not inclined to study with real purpose the question of military intervention at all. They knew, moreover, that during these years the British army was in process of transformation. Though the result would no doubt mean a more valuable ally from the military point of view, what of the position in the meantime? With Russia making a slow recovery from Manchurian disasters and internal upheaval, the military value of the new "Triple Entente" in its earliest days must have seemed doubtful.

The situation changed in many ways after the advent of Sir Henry Wilson. The new Director differed from both Grierson and Ewart. Grierson's strategic views, based primarily on an appreciation of British interests, turned his attention to Antwerp and the Belgian coastline. Ewart, for his part, displayed caution in approach—

¹ But certainly not less to Belgium. See above, p. 79.

ing the whole question, perhaps an equally salutary British instinct. Wilson, on the other hand, devoted to France, in intimate contact already with high French officers, amenable as no other to French strategic conceptions, was exactly the man the French would have chosen to appoint if they had been able to do so.

The consequences of Wilson's appointment were, from the strategic point of view, grave enough. But did it give the French the certainty they wanted? ¹ It is not improbable that he more than once gave it as his personal opinion that the French could rely implicitly on British intervention. If, on one occasion, with Grey's consent, he discussed with Castelnau the problems of a hostile Belgium, it cannot have been entirely without effect on the French military authorities.² To do this was undoubtedly to enlarge the possibilities of British intervention; equally to reduce the importance in this connection of Belgian resistance to a violation by Germany of her neutrality. The French hopes of British assistance can certainly not have been reduced by what now happened.

It is true that they never professed absolute certainty about British intervention. They could lay it down, at least officially, as doubtful in 1913—*Nous agirons donc prudemment en ne faisant pas état des forces anglaises*

¹ For Huguet's views on this point, see *Britain and the War*, pp. 26-7. He says that after 1913 the probability of co-operation between the two armies became so certain that during the year he received orders to leave his regiment in case of general mobilisation in order to become Chief of the Military Mission which was to be attached to the British Expeditionary Force.

² See above, p. 136.

*dans nos projets d'opérations.*¹ Cambon, as we know, could assume a deathly pallor on August 1st, 1914. But after four years of Wilson, France could at least congratulate herself on having made as reasonably sure of British intervention as was possible without a signed and sealed alliance. Nevertheless, he would be rash indeed who, on this ground alone, attributed to a nation which in 1913 was apparently anxious about the growing disparity between its military forces and those of Germany, the main responsibility for having brought on the War.

It must remain doubtful whether Wilson was entirely suitable for the post which he occupied. His work of conversing with the French was of the utmost delicacy. It called for the *finesse* of the diplomatist rather than for the qualities more usually associated with the soldier. In some men the two characters have been happily combined but it was not so with Wilson. He saw things too much in the contrast of black and white; his talk in 1911 of a Grand Alliance is a sign of his failure to appreciate, not only the finer shades of Grey's policy, but the fact that anything simpler was really out of the question. Being a man who was honestly convinced that in all circumstances Britain must fight alongside France, he was not likely to stress the conditional nature of the promises which he made. "Atmosphere," in these conversations, counted for much.

It is difficult to acquit Grey of all responsibility for Wilson's activities. He must have been the last person

¹ *Les Armées Françaises*, I, 1, p. 18, and cf. p. 50.

to underestimate the importance of Wilson's task. Unless we credit him with the desire, at least after 1911, to make a French alliance in all but name, it is not easy to understand why he did not more carefully control the activities of the Director of Military Operations. As it was, he left Wilson, the partisan of an impossible foreign policy, one of the leading opponents of the Government's Irish policy, a strong advocate of compulsory service which the Government condemned and the confidant of Opposition leaders, to remain in the closest touch with the General Staff of France. Taking his own standards as to the rôle of the military conversations in his conduct of foreign affairs, it was enjoined on him to employ for this work the coolest and most dispassionate officer available. Or, if Grey was unable to interfere with Wilson, it is a strange commentary upon a period which is still frequently referred to without apparent irony as one of "democratic government."

But to criticise Grey's conduct in this respect is merely to illustrate the dangers, not necessarily to condemn the policy of conversations with France. A good case could be easily made out in their favour. Was it not elementary common sense to consider in good time the problems of Anglo-French co-operation in a war against Germany? But another and equally obvious point was that, to do so would inevitably increase the moral obligation on Britain's part to intervene. The question which each must answer for himself is whether such conversations can at any time be, in fact, entirely conditional and non-binding, however fre-

quently they may be described as such. There are perhaps higher considerations in Policy than strategic considerations. When the latter are admitted there is a danger that Foreign Policy will cease to condition Defence, that the respective rôles will in fact be reversed.

CHAPTER XI

THE WIDER ASPECTS—STRATEGIC

It is possible to believe that military conversations were necessary or even inevitable without approving the course which they eventually took. Something may therefore be said on the strategic aspect, though it is one which the layman must approach with diffidence.

The prospective war would obviously have both a naval and a military side; the air-factor (except for intelligence purposes) being as yet practically negligible. Germany could claim to possess not only the most formidable army in the world, but also considerable strength at sea. Russia's contribution, on the other hand, must be almost exclusively on land and the value of her vast hosts, in the earliest stages, was at least open to question. Moreover, by movement against Russia, Austria could powerfully aid Germany in her stupendous task of fighting a two-fronted war. France had a large army of which she could reasonably expect to use the greater part against Germany, for if Austria had no serious fear of having to defend at the outset an Italian front, neither had the French. France had, in addition, a powerful fleet in the Mediterranean.

What of Great Britain? In this connection there

was one outstanding fact—her sea-power. In 1912 she concentrated her strength in home waters with the avowed intention of giving herself superiority over Germany. She could thus be expected more than merely to counter Germany in the North Sea; to establish, in fact, a command of the sea which would go a long way to cut off Germany from foreign supplies, many of which appeared to be vital for the successful prosecution of war. In addition England had available possibly six Divisions of highly trained professional troops for service abroad.

A variety of combinations was possible for the "Allies"; but, from the military point of view, the situation was really determined by the probable action of Germany. Germany was obliged to contemplate a war on two fronts, the French and the Russian; she must, therefore, divide her forces accordingly. In view of the fact that the Russian machine would be slow to put in motion, it seemed likely that Germany would choose to strike rapidly at France, knock her out and then, having meantime stood on the defensive in the east, turn and deal with Russia. Doubts necessarily remained as to what proportion of her forces she would use for the blow in the west and as to the exact method in which that blow would be delivered. But an advance through Belgium had for long seemed inevitable in view of its manifest advantages from the strategic point of view.

So far as British military intervention was concerned, there were, as the above pages will have shown, a number of possibilities. There was the Fisher ~~plan to throw~~

comparatively small numbers of British troops as near as possible to the centre of German power, moral and otherwise. This, we may say, conceived of the "decisive point" as situated in the mind of the enemy higher command, rather than in the main battle-line itself. Apart from this, there were the "Grierson" and the "Wilson" alternatives. Though both had something in common, the differences between them are far more important. Of the two, the former was a more British and independent conception. It was essentially based on two conditions—a German violation of Belgian neutrality and the importance to Britain of keeping a hostile and great Power away from Antwerp and the Belgian coastline. In addition, it is true, it bore a certain relation to the French war-plan. The Anglo-Belgian forces might seriously threaten the right flank of a German army conceived of as marching through Belgium, south of the Meuse. It is remarkable, in fact, how many alternatives this plan could serve. It is no less remarkable for the use which it made of British sea-power. Antwerp was eventually to become the Base; in that way sea-power was to be used in a similar, if more restricted way to that envisaged in the Fisher plan. It was to make possible a standing menace to the German flank and rear.

The "Wilson" plan, in contrast, stood avowedly for alignment with the French armies; the British Expeditionary Force being designated an extension of the French left. It made but a restricted use of British sea-power; the rôle of the navy being essentially passive, to keep open, that is, the short lines of communication across

the Channel, if, in addition, it secured the British Isles against invasion.

It is all-important to notice the premises on which this plan rested. They were essentially French. It assumed a German sweep, though one of restricted radius, through Belgium. The French confidently expected the main weight of the German attack on the common frontier, and their plan was an immediate offensive by the French armies. The British army, it may be noted, was conceived of merely as a possible reinforcement of the left wing. It was not regarded as essential to the success of the plan. At all events, as we have seen, the French professed at least to regard British assistance as so uncertain that it should not be counted on in "projets d'opérations." It was thus considered that Plan XVII had excellent prospects even without British assistance.

The British, or at least Sir Henry Wilson, must have shared this optimism. Something has been said already of the grave dangers inherent in Plan XVII,¹ of the miscalculation of the strength and direction of the German advance and the doubtful wisdom of an offensive when all the advantages were enjoyed by the party assailed. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the British might have shown more salutary inquisitiveness about the details of the French intentions. If Wilson signed the agreement with Dubail before receiving full information, he at least learnt more of the details very soon after and, having done so, would appear to have raised no objections. There is, for

¹ See above, p. 121.

instance, no evidence that, in spite of the war-game worked out years before in the time of Grierson, he questioned the French assumption that there would be no movement in force by the Germans north of the Meuse. Nor is there any that he felt uneasy about the prospects of a general French offensive. Nor, above all, that he ever suspected that the war might last for years.

Here perhaps was the crux of the whole question of British war-strategy before 1914 and, perhaps, to-day. Whatever else may be said, this country was eminently fitted to wage a long war. Given time, Great Britain could mobilise her vast reserves, both at home and in the Empire, of wealth, supplies and, if need be, men. Her sea-power, in the end, might well be the boaconstrictor which would strangle the life out of the Power round which it was wrapped. It could not, admittedly, do these things during the first campaign; its influence could only tell, with time.

Wilson, however, not only minimised the importance of the fleet,¹ but also overlooked the self-governing Empire. "Canada is gone" was his verdict after hearing Sir Wilfrid Laurier in the Imperial Conference of 1911; and if he can be excused for misunderstanding the subtleties of that statesman's views on the question of imperial unity, he might well have borne in mind that others in the same Conference and in the Colonies held a different kind of language.² He may well have thought it doubtful whether the Dominions would be "reliable" at the critical moment. Certainly, he

¹ ~~Callwell, I, p. 99.~~

² Callwell, I, p. 96.

does not seem to have paid much attention to their possibilities in war and when he thought of the British army always had his mind too firmly riveted on his cherished six Divisions.

Yet Britain was a scattered Empire, not simply an island; and if the Russian war-machine was slow to move, so also was the British. But, curiously enough, British war-strategy in 1914 was based on rapidity of intervention. The war was generally conceived of as an affair of months; Wilson indeed was still thinking in such terms at the end of October 1914.¹ In any case, it was thought necessary that Britain should intervene promptly. Not only would the Force be a valuable reinforcement to the French, but their mere presence would be a splendid moral tonic for the ally. And this, in spite of the fact that the same ally had adopted a plan which postulated British assistance as uncertain!

The idea that the war would be short did not, of course, commend itself to all British soldiers before 1914. Both Haig and Kitchener, in fact, thought in terms of years, not months, and did not underestimate the task which would face their country. This was, indeed, the most important question of all. If it were to take time for Britain to make her real war-power available, then it would appear advisable to pause before throwing in the flower of the British professional army. But Wilson, sceptical about the Territorials and convinced that the war would be short, paid little attention to the possibilities of the Expeditionary Force as a core around which the vast Imperial armies might be built. But

¹ Callwell, I, p. 185 (letter of October 26th).

if he prepared for the short war which he anticipated, he might incidentally have prepared for a longer; indeed, to provide for variations was perhaps a simple strategic precaution.

Even though Britain were to send troops abroad immediately there still remained the question of their destination. For this alternatives had been provided in 1906 and 1911. It is to be admitted that, in view of the changed attitude of the Belgians as a result of their reluctance to jeopardise their neutrality, a plan of the type elaborated by Grierson in 1906 could not be prepared before war broke out. But when hostilities had begun; when Belgium had shown her intention to resist the invader, the position was different. Then, in spite of difficulties and the probable need for much improvisation, the British forces might well have been sent to Belgium.

So, apparently, thought the Commander-in-Chief, Sir John French, and the veteran Lord Roberts. At the Great War Council held on August 5th, 1914, both spoke of going to Antwerp.¹ Wilson, of course, was horrified; it seemed that years of careful preparation were to go by the board and the whole Cause, as he saw it, to be endangered. Haig, too, who had a more judicious and sounder view than most of the whole war-problem, opposed French's proposals. Indeed he "trembled at the reckless way Sir J. French spoke about the 'advantages' of the B.E.F. operating from Antwerp." Apparently he feared lest the British should

¹ On this War Council, see Callwell, I, pp. 158-9; Churchill, *World Crisis*, pp. 231-2; Duff Cooper, *Haig*, I, p. 130.

suffer defeat in detail if separated from the French; but he also had, as we know, suspicions about Sir John French's qualifications for the great appointment which he had received. At the same time he dwelt on the probable length of the war and on the consequent importance of economising officers and N.C.O.'s. As it would, he thought, be necessary to raise an army of 1,000,000 men, their services for training-purposes would be invaluable. Even so, he urged the importance of sending as strong a force as possible as soon as possible to join the French.¹ Eventually it was decided to follow the existing plan and, in part, strangely enough, because the Admiralty could not guarantee the safety of transport to Antwerp.²

There were, of course, elements of compromise about the final decision. Two Divisions were retained in England ostensibly to deal with the phantom of a German invasion. A certain number of officers were held back for the purposes which Haig had emphasised. But in the main the Wilsonian strategy was now put to the test.

Grierson in 1906 must have satisfied himself that the risk, which apparently impressed Haig could be taken without grave danger. It was at least a moot point. One is tempted to speculate about the possibilities of such a move as Sir John French indicated on August 5th. Much would obviously have depended on two factors: the speed at which the British arrived and how the Germans were held in front. But would even the threat of such action by the British against

¹ Duff Cooper, *loc. cit.*

² Churchill, *ibid.* p. 232.

their flank and rear have dislocated the initial German moves in the west? Von Moltke does not seem to have had the full courage of Von Schlieffen's convictions and, in view of his reactions to the Russian advance in East Prussia and to rumours on the eve of the Marne of landings in Belgium, he seems to have been markedly susceptible to the influence of diversions.

These things are conjectural, but the actual plans of the French and the course of events in August 1914 are not. We are bound to inquire whether the immediate dispatch of the British Expeditionary Force to France had in fact a decisive influence on the course of the opening campaign, if, in other words, the essential feature of Wilson's strategy had any justification in the event. We know, of course, that, whatever the incidental glories of the Retreat from Mons, the British army was sent to one of the greatest reverses in its history. But did its presence make all the difference between temporary defeat and irretrievable disaster? Only four Divisions were actually sent abroad, it is true, and to this extent Wilson's plan was not carried out. But it may be doubted whether the absence of the two extra Divisions made the difference which his apologists are disposed to believe. The initial stroke of the Germans was, no doubt, a general failure in the sense that it secured no decision. Indeed, they failed even to garner the most valuable fruits of the victory which they did win, notably by omitting to seize, as they might well have done, the Channel ports. But it is extremely doubtful if this failure can be ascribed to the ~~presence~~ on the French left of the British Corps.

It was due rather to the blunders of the German Higher Command. There, it seems, after all, lay the "decisive point." Even at the Marne on the vital September 13th, if additional British forces would have been invaluable, their use would have been to threaten the German flank and rear, not to strengthen the frontal attack.

Wilson might have gained greater credit from his scheme had the Germans advanced along the line which the French anticipated or if the French plan itself had been different. But this merely serves to condemn still more his failure to question the validity of the ally's preconceptions. It illustrates also the inevitable difficulties of concerting action between two Powers, especially when one of the parties is not entirely assured of the support of the other. The chief weakness of the Wilsonian strategy was thus, that, in effect, it postulated a military alliance between France and Britain with all the consequent mutual confidence and exchange of information when this did not in fact exist. Grierson's plan, we may note, did not; it was on the contrary completely in line with the diplomatic position.

We know now what were the consequences of alignment with the French. Once aligned, it was impossible to break loose except by inviting certain disaster. Britain in the end was obliged to raise the conscript army of Wilson's dreams. So "amphibious strategy" gave way to a thorough-going land war in Europe with all the sacrifice entailed. Posterity may well be tempted to wonder at the use of sea-power now made by Britain in the greatest crisis of her history.

How it will apportion the responsibility is another matter. It will not miss the importance in this connection of Sir Henry Wilson. But it may look farther back beyond him and see as the first true link in the chain of inevitable consequence the negotiation of a "goodwill" settlement with France in 1904.

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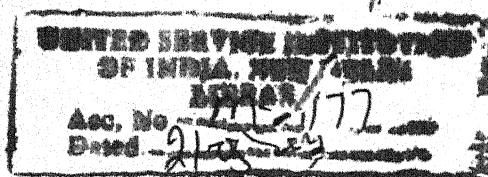
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